MISS URACA

EVELYN E. GREEN

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MISS URACA

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Miss Uraca

By

EVELYN EVERETT-GREEN

Author of "The Wilful Willoughbys," "The Doctor's Dozen," "Falconer of Falconhurst," "Flats," etc., etc.

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MISS URACA.

CHAPTER I.

THE PROPOSED EXPERIMENT.

"YOU look rather down in the mouth, old fellow. What 's the matter?"

"Oh, is that you, Mannesty? Come in, old chap. I 'm very glad to see you. Well, I am just a little bit bothered."

Mannesty came into the room, shutting the door behind him, and thinking to himself, as he looked round, that if he had half the good things of this life that fell to his friend's lot, he should take pretty good care that no bothers came his way. He should rather like, as he expressed it to himself, to find the thing that could bother him under such pleasant outward circumstances.

Certainly nothing could be more luxuriously

comfortable than those bachelor chambers overlooking Piccadilly and the Green Park. The rooms were lofty, and the decoration was rich and sumptuous, as were also the furniture and hangings. If the room was to be taken as an index of its owner's taste, that would certainly have to be pronounced excellent, and something rather out of the way for a young man of the present century. For gracing the walls there were none of the sporting prints and theatrical photographs which are so often found in the sanctums of young fellows of his age and standing. Pictures there were, but they were real works of art by the leading men of the day; and though spurs and riding-whips hung over the mantel-shelf, telling that the master of the place had masculine tastes, he did not apparently care about living in a litter, and save for a number of books and papers strewing about upon a large carved writing-table in a deep recess, the room was in excellent order, and would not have disgraced a lady occupier. The long windows were thrown wide open to the summer air, and the broad balcony upon which they led was filled with flowering plants and shrubs. There were cut flowers in the

room, too — roses, lilies, and heavy-scented stove plants. No wonder that Mannesty looked round him with admiring eyes, though the place was familiar enough to him, and thought that the owner of such an abode (to say nothing of the best turned out dog-cart and a pair of the smartest saddle-horses to be seen in the Park that season) ought to count himself a happy man, and to feel the pressure of trouble but lightly.

"Bothered, are you, Rat? Well, I should like to know what you can have to bother you? Seems to me you've everything in the world a fellow can want in the present, and golden prospects for the future. Don't they say you will be the richest commoner in the kingdom one of these days? I don't think if that were my case I should feel much bothered by anything else."

The man familiarly addressed as "Rat" bent a searching glance upon his friend, an odd smile playing round the corners of his mouth.

"Sit down, old fellow, and have a cigar. I know you smoke at all hours of the day and night. I should like a chat with you as well as anything. Perhaps you will hit on a bright

idea. Such a thing has been known before now."

Ratcliff Fountaine's "weeds" were not to be despised—though, to tell the truth, his friends smoked far more of them than did their owner. Mannesty deposited his six feet and odd inches in a luxurious lounging-chair, and looked across at his friend, whose hands were clasped behind his head, and whose face had put on a look of meditative gravity—the look which had struck the young officer when he first entered the room.

The two young men, sitting opposite each other in the strong light of that summer's morning, presented a marked contrast to one another. Mannesty was a splendidly handsome fellow, long-limbed, broad-shouldered, well-set-up in every way, with all the precision and alertness given by military training, combined with much natural grace of a robust and manly character. One could tell at a glance that such a man would be an excellent shot, a first-rate rider, a fine player at all games of strength and skill. Then his handsome face, bronzed with exposure to foreign suns, was as open as the day, frank, merry, and bubbling over with fun

upon the smallest provocation. His eyes were brown, and so was his hair, and the long drooping moustache which shaded his laughing lips. He had been for three years on foreign service in India and Egypt, and was now home on leave, after which he would go back to finish his time. He and his present host had been at Eton together, and they had never entirely lost sight of each other; so, when Mannesty on his arrival home had chanced to knock up against his former friend, he had been very glad of the cordial invitation to drop in at these pleasant rooms whenever he liked, and the two had seen much of each other during the past weeks.

Nature had been far less generous in her dealings with Ratcliff Fountaine. Perhaps she felt that the good things he possessed by right of inheritance rendered him independent of her good offices; perhaps she felt that it would not be fair to lavish her rich gifts upon one who could make his way in life easily enough without them; however that may have been, young Fountaine, though heir to a baronetcy, a fine old property, and a wonderfully large fortune, had little of personal beauty

to recommend him, and his appearance was generally summed up by the painful definition of "hopelessly insignificant."

In height the young man was barely up to the average, and being exceedingly slight, and also very well-proportioned, he did not look so tall as he really was. His features were clearly cut, but followed no regular pattern, and possessed no real beauty of outline. Then the face was altogether too small and colourless to attract notice, and the dead fairness of the hair, without a touch of gold to lighten it up, made but a very poor setting. A very faint moustache, of the palest yellow, did nothing to break the dead monotony of the pale face; whilst the eyes, which were really dark blue in colour, and by no means lacking in beauty and depth, were generally hidden by the large and heavy lids.

A very keen observer, or an unusually acute physiognomist, might detect traces of marked individuality in the set of the curiously arched lips, in the clean square outline of the jaw, and in the quick, keen glances shot from time to time from beneath the shadow of the overhanging brows; but the majority of those we

meet in our daily life are not keen observers, and this young man was so peculiarly quiet and retiring that few took the trouble to notice him when he was in their company. Had it not been for his brilliant worldly prospects, he would have gone through life most likely without attracting the smallest notice. As it was, people frequently shrugged their shoulders, and remarked what a misfortune it was for Sir Hugh and Lady Fountaine to have such a "creature" as that for their only child. At Eton he had been dubbed "Rat" for his small stature, lonely ways, and quiet persistence, and the name had stuck to him more or less since. He never appeared to resent being so addressed by old cronies, and Mannesty seldom called him anything else. "Dick" had been another sobriquet—won for him, perhaps, from its association with the name Ratcliff; the more so, that he had been a great collector of flowers and bulbs and seeds, which he frequently obtained from a seedsman of that name. By these two names he had been known to all his old school-fellows, and was known to them still whenever they chanced to knock up against him in after days.

"Well, Rat, and what's the bother?" asked Mannesty, when he had smoked in silence for a while.

"I expect you'll laugh if I tell you," said Ratcliff, with a shadowy smile hovering round the corner of his lips; "but it's no laughing matter to me, all the same. My father and mother have just set their hearts upon seeing me married, and that pretty soon."

"Well, that's serious, at any rate," answered Mannesty; "I don't call matrimony at all a laughing matter. But surely there are any number of nice girls that you might pick and choose from in the world this season? You see you are such a lucky beggar, you have only to throw the handkerchief, you know. Any girl in her senses"—

An odd flash crossed Ratcliff's face as these words were spoken. For once in a way, he lifted his eyelids and looked full at Mannesty. The effect of that look was to cause the young officer to stop short in the middle of his sentence.

"Exactly," said Ratcliff, in his peculiarly low and negligent tones. "You have stated, or were about to state the matter with your usual

force and clearness. I am, or shall be, a very rich man one of these days. I am an only child, and both my parents are exceedingly wealthy, and they are good enough to adore me, and to long to see a child of mine upon their knees before they die. They would welcome as a daughter almost any woman I brought to them as my affianced wife. The course of true love would be made to run most marvellously smooth. All this is pretty well known in the world of fashion, where everybody's business and private affairs are publicly canvassed in fashionable drawing-rooms, and the agreeable consequence is that I am sought out and made much of by every mamma in London who has daughters to marry and can get an introduction; whilst, as for the daughters themselves"—

"Why, they would say 'Yes' the moment you asked them—any one of them, pretty creatures," said Mannesty, laughing. "You are a lucky dog, Rat; you have only got to pick and choose, as I said before, and you will get a wife for the asking who"—

"Who will be very glad to marry my money, my prospects, my title that is to be, but who

will only put up with myself as a necessary evil—the pill so liberally gilded," concluded Ratcliff very quietly. "I have been through that once before, Mannesty, and the sensation was not an agreeable one. I have no particular wish to repeat it, thank you."

Mannesty was about to treat the first half of the sentence as a joke, but the last words arrested his attention, and he turned a face of lively interest towards the speaker.

"Been through it once, have you, old fellow? I 'd no idea of that. I didn't look upon you as the sort that falls easily in love."

"I don't know that I was exactly in love," answered Ratcliff, in his slow, leisurely way, looking straight out of the sunny window as he spoke. "It was about two-and-a-half years ago, when I was just three-and-twenty, when I had come back from three years of foreign travel, and my parents were as eager as they are now for me to marry and settle down near them, and have a home of my own. I think they were half afraid the roving fit would get hold of me, and that I should never settle down again, and I was willing enough to gratify them if I could, and thought, with you,

that I should have no trouble in finding a nice wife amongst all the good-looking girls I met when I began to go more into society."

"I should think not, indeed," breathed Mannesty softly, though Ratcliff did not heed the interruption.

"I need not mention names. The mother appeared to be a very sweet woman, and her daughters were lovely girls. I hesitated a good while between them, and finally asked the elder one—a dark beauty, with a lot of what you would perhaps call 'go' in her—to marry me. I admired her very much. She interested me, and I thought that she liked me for my own sake. She was my own age, and we appeared to have many tastes and sympathies in common. As I had never been in love, I did not exactly know if what I felt was the great passion, but she certainly filled the major part of my thoughts. I liked being with her; I preferred talking to her to anybody else, unless perhaps her mother, and I did not think she even knew, still less cared, that I was a wealthy man."

"Girls in these days aren't such fools as

not to know or care," muttered Mannesty under his breath.

"I know that now," answered Ratcliff calmly. "I will tell you in a few words how it ended. I had been called away from town on business for a few days. I was not expected back till the following week, but being something of a fool then, I thought I must just run up for the Sunday to see—*her* for a few hours, and assure her that I was well, and see for myself that she was not pining in my absence." A faint curve of the lips that was hardly a smile betrayed some of the fine scorn the young man was feeling, though the scorn was more at his own credulity than the falseness of the lady. "I arrived late at the house. They were receiving company, it seemed. The hall door was open, and I walked straight in. I knew the ways of the house, and its ins and outs. I saw that the garden behind was illuminated, and I thought that *she* would very likely be there. The glare and heat of the house, would, no doubt, try her. She would go out there to be quiet—and to think of me."

Mannesty shot a keen glance at him.

"I think I know what is coming, old fellow.

Don't say any more if it hurts you. You found her with another fellow?"

"Yes, the fellow she really loved, the man she ought to have been engaged to then—the man, I am glad to say, she did eventually marry. I came upon them accidentally. I came up from behind. I had heard words spoken before I could show myself. He was upbraiding her. She was defending herself, as women always will. She was doing what her mother wished; she loved pleasure, luxury, all the soft things of this life; and, after all, the man who offered them 'was not so bad.' She could just tolerate him, she was gracious enough to say. 'I know he is a miserable little nonentity; in company I hate him, I feel quite ashamed of him by the side of other men,' she was saying, as I went round and stood before her; 'but when one gets him quite alone he is really rather better. Of course he can never be anything much to me. It's awfully hard to have to choose between you, George, and'— There she saw me, and knew that I had heard. Well, we need not go into the whole story. What followed was not a very edifying experience, but it taught me a lesson I shall not

forget in a hurry. It pretty well comes to this, you see, Mannesty, I don't intend to be married for my money, and I see very little chance of being taken for my own insignificant merits. It is just possible that there might be a woman in the world whom, if I loved her, might love me for my own sake, but then how shall I ever know when she is found? I am a little less green than I was when I was fooled that first time, but I do not profess to understand women, and my very strong impression is that they cannot tolerate me in their inmost hearts, but simply put up with me as the needless, yet practically necessary, encumbrance to the social advantages a union with me would offer. That's not altogether the kind of bargain that I care about striking. I could make up my mind to go through life very contentedly alone, but if I am to take to myself a wife (and I don't like setting myself against the wishes of my parents, who are so extraordinarily wrapped up in me), I have a possibly unreasonable prejudice for letting it be a match of love on both sides. I know that that sort of thing is fast going by. People tell you in solemn earnest that it is the marriages of con-

venience that are best in the long run, and for all I know they may be right. One certainly knows how badly some of the over-head-and-ears love matches have turned out. But, all the same, I stick to my old-fashioned prejudice for an old-fashioned wooing, and I don't call it that when, as you gracefully put it, I have only to throw the handkerchief, and the selected damsel will come with all docility to the sacrificial altar, because her parents wish it, and she likes to marry the 'catch' of the season."

Mannesty was looking roused now; his eyes were fixed full on his companion's face.

"I'm hanged if I don't see why a woman should not care for you for your own sake, Rat. You're a thundering good fellow at heart, you know, and as manly a man as it's ever been my lot to meet. 'Faint heart never won fair lady.' I don't know that that's much to the point, all the same, for the difficulty isn't winning the hand, but the heart, and no fellow can see through a girl—they're twice too 'cute for the likes of us. I tell you what you *might* do, though, Rat. You might let the public believe you had gone off on your travels again in

your yacht, and then take a new name, and lay aside your grandeur, and go through the world knight-errant fashion, looking for a distressed damsel who would love you for your doughty deeds and personal charms. There must be some such to be found in the world, and if you were to go where you are not known, why, you would simply be judged on your own personal merits."

"Sort of 'Lord of Burleigh' arrangement, eh, Mannesty?" said the other reflectively. "Well, there might be something in it, to be sure. Do you seriously think it could be done? The world is such an uncommonly small place when one comes to think of it, and I want an English wife; I have all the national prejudice against foreign madams ruling in English homes."

"To be sure. Oh, I'd not go out of England; but really, Rat, you seem to me to know your own country far less well than the backwoods of America and the trackless deserts of Africa. You just go down into some rather quiet and outlandish place, far away from your own home; call yourself Dick Ratcliff, or anything else you like, and put up as a travelling

artist, or anything else you choose to select, at some little wayside inn. People in outlandish places are pretty hospitable, and if you don't find the right sort in one you can move on to another. You have done plenty of roughing it in your time, and will not mind leaving your luxuries behind for a while."

A faint smile curved Ratcliff's lips. He did not say anything, but Mannesty felt perfectly certain that there was hardly a man in the kingdom who cared so little for outward luxury as this old comrade of his, despite the harmonious beauty with which he had surrounded himself. He had begun to discover a latent power about Ratcliff—a power he had felt in boyhood without being able to analyse it, which had drawn him towards the insignificant lad, he knew not why. The old attraction had manifested itself upon their recent encounter in London, and Mannesty had come to feel a certain kind of admiration and respect for his friend, which would have surprised Ratcliff not a little had he been aware of it. "I could fancy that fellow marching up to a cannon's mouth as cool as a cucumber in the face of the deadliest peril," the young

officer had thought more than once, as he had watched the other talk, and drawn from him the story of some of his adventures in far-off lands, where he had been placed in moments of peculiar danger. Ratcliff never by any chance uttered the smallest boast; he never appeared to be aware that there was anything intrepid in the way in which he had faced situations of peril. When Mannesty had once congratulated him upon his steadiness of nerve, he merely said, with a slight smile, that when one's life depended on keeping cool, no fellow but a fool would go and lose his head, and so had passed the matter off without a notion that his companion was secretly admiring his quiet daring and dauntless pluck.

He was sitting pondering still in the same attitude, and suddenly turned upon his companion, and said,—

"I 'll do it, if you 'll go with me."

"With all my heart," answered Mannesty, who, being practically without family ties, was rather wondering how to occupy the time from the close of the London season till the commencement of the shooting. He had some reading to do for his next examination, and

was willing enough to go into some quiet place. For a companion he certainly felt he might do much worse than Ratcliff Fountaine.

"Very good, then," said the latter, after hearing what his friend had to say. "That will make it all easy. You are the rich young army man, whose name and good looks and general attractions will give us the *entrée* into the houses of the places we go into, and I am the humble Oxford graduate who has undertaken to coach you for your next exam. I will be as good as my word, Mannesty, for I will get all the books you want, and we will read seriously together; for, as you know, one of my inferior idiosyncrasies is a love for books and study. I will play my part to perfection, you shall see. It will be ten times better and more natural than doing the superannuated artist dodge, which has been run threadbare since the Lord of Burleigh's days. You will, of course, be just yourself—Reginald Mannesty I can be, as you say, Dick Ratcliff—Mr Ratcliff, I suppose you will have to dub me, unless we go in for being friends as well as master and pupil. We can get some fishing for the present, and later on there will

be shooting, and even hunting, if I cannot succeed in my quest. It won't be a bad way of passing the time, and as you have the purse we need not rough it any more than is agreeable to you. Indeed, it would be better for you to have an air of easy affluence, as we want to get into the best society the places have to offer. As I say, I believe my parents would be almost ready to welcome the beggar maid as my bride if I took to play King Cophetua, but I have a decided feeling that the happiest marriages are made where there is equality in birth. Money has but very little to do with it, and I would rather look for my fair lady in the homes of the gentry of the old-fashioned country sort than in any other place in the world."

"I'm with you there, old man," answered Mannesty heartily, "and I wish you all the luck in the world in your quest."

CHAPTER II.

THE UNDERWOODS OF STAUNTON.

"URACA!"

"Here. Do you want me?"

"Mother wants one of us to run down to the village. You might as well go. It's too hot for us."

"I want some stamps at the post-office, Uraca."

"I want a message left at the vicarage."

"And I wish you would just see Mrs Greeves, and tell her that I *must* have my white embroidered muslin home by Friday. She will attend so much better to you than a servant."

All these sentences were uttered by invisible speakers, and reached the ears of a little group beneath a spreading lime tree through the open windows of the house close by. The group comprised three little children, a dog or two, and a dark-eyed girl, slight of figure, and of

immature and youthful aspect, who was busily engaged in disentangling the tail of a kite, which proceeding was being intently watched by the two sturdy urchins to whom the airy monster plainly belonged. The three children immediately set up an indignant protest.

"Oh, Cara, don't go — why should you? Make one of the others go this time. They are *such* lazy things! They never do anything, and we are always busy. And it is just as hot for you as for anybody else. Don't listen to them. We want you."

"Oh, but we mustn't be selfish, we little folks," answered, with a bright smile, the girl whom the children addressed as Cara, and those in the house as Uraca. "We will finish the kite's tail first, and then we will go down to the village together. It won't be very hot if we take the winding path along the river bank. And we can leave the jug of soup at poor old Mrs Clark's; and you can buy the red paper you wanted to make the kite's tail longer."

Tommy brightened up a little as he heard the last words; and the girl, raising her voice, called back to those within doors,—

"I 'll go in a few minutes. I 'm just finishing a job out here for the boys."

"Well, be quick," answered a sweet but slightly peevish and imperious voice. "I particularly want Mrs Greeves to have the message about my dress quickly. I could not go to the Grange on Friday in all this heat without my muslin. Mind you tell her to be very careful how she gets it up. Sometimes she is so abominably careless."

"Is there a party at the Grange on Friday?" asked Uraca, with a look of interest. The Grange was a fine old historical house, and the girl enjoyed a visit to it greatly. The master of the house had a fine collection of old pictures in his gallery, and the bright-eyed little Uraca was rather a favourite of his, from the intelligent interest she always took in everything he showed her.

"A garden party," answered the voice from within the house; "but you're not going, Uraca."

"Didn't they ask us all?" with a little inflection of disappointment in the clear tones.

"Yes; but now that Edith is here we really cannot take such a party. People will call us

a 'caution,' or some pretty name like that. One of us must stop at home."

That appeared to be final. No further explanation was made. Indeed it went without saying that if one of the party from this house remained at home, Uraca was to be that one. Was she not the youngest? Was she not the only plain member of a handsome family? The thing was patent to all. Even the girl herself refrained from further comment, and the brightening eyes of the children brought some consolation for the slight stab of disappointment.

"Oh, Cara," whispered little Edie, the youngest of the small trio around her, "if all the rest go to a big party and we are left at home, we can have the gipsy tea in the wood you promised us long ago. Oh, won't that be nice?"

The boys hopped and skipped with delight. The tiny pucker smoothed itself from Uraca's brow. After all, was she not as happy with her brother's children as in the finest of fine company? And then she really had no proper dress for a big party, and Edna was apt to say cutting things about the "ugly duckling" if

she went out with them in her home-made frocks. Perhaps it would be nicer at home after all, and in any case she would make a very happy time of it for the children. They should enjoy themselves thoroughly, whatever she did.

Uraca looked far more like the sister than the aunt of the children clustered round her, and they had never given her the title of respect that she might have claimed, and that was accorded to all her sisters by the little ones. To them she was simply "Cara," their baby lips having rejected the hard Uraca long ago, and given her an amended name of their own, which was always sweet to her ears. She saw a good deal of these little folks, for her eldest brother's married home was not very far distant, and he was a frequent visitor at his father's house, bringing with him his wife and children, who sometimes stayed on at their grandparents when the father had to go back to his work.

The kite-tail disentangled and safely wound up, Uraca rose from her knees and went towards the house, the children still remaining in the friendly shelter of the great tree. In

through the long drawing-room window stepped the light-footed girl, and found herself in the company of the ladies of the household, who were gathered together in that cool and pleasant apartment. Mrs Underwood at her davenport, with her letters and household books before her; "Mrs Tom," as she was frequently called, lazily employed in making a frock for her small daughter; and the three handsome Underwood girls, lying back in comfortable chairs, either reading novels or pretending to work, though it was plain that there was more talking done than anything else just now.

Certainly Mrs Underwood had good cause to be proud of her family. A single glance round that pretty drawing-room would be enough to assure the spectator that he was in the presence of some remarkably good-looking women. Mrs Underwood herself was a stately matron of dignified and pleasing aspect, who looked young to be the grandmother of the healthy trio outside, and whose features had not lost their clearness of outline or their delicacy of colouring, though the lines of the figure had widened out, and the light grace of youth was departed. Anna, the eldest of the

trio of daughters present, was a handsome and stylish brunette, with fine eyes, and well-turned figure, and large, well-formed features. She had great animation in society, and was a very good rider and tennis-player. It was a source of some surprise and chagrin to her parents that at the age of twenty-six she was still unmarried, and not even engaged ; but she herself professed to like her liberty too well to barter it away, and certainly the life led at Staunton House was pleasant and easy enough.

But it was the two younger sisters, Edna and Violet, who were the real beauties of the neighbourhood, the girls who were so admired wherever they went as to produce quite a small sensation. Edna was dazzlingly fair, with rich golden hair, long-lashed blue eyes of appealing sweetness (when she chose), and the most exquisite features and colouring. Violet had the same delicate features and rose-tinted face, but her hair was soft dark brown with crisp waves in it, and her eyes were a liquid hazel that looked all sorts of colours in varying lights. Edna was twenty-two, and Violet a year younger, whilst the "ugly duckling" of the family was but eighteen, and was accounted

little more than a chit in the schoolroom, where, indeed, in the winter months, the best part of her time was spent.

Uraca had never claimed any kind of equality with her more gifted and attractive sisters. She seemed just as different from them, just as much of a stranger in the family brood, as the cygnet amongst the ducklings of the story. She was on a much smaller scale for one thing, and was only just growing out of the lank and gawky stage of development. Indeed, so gradual had been the approach of soft and girlish grace, that it had altogether passed the notice of her family, and they continued to think and sometimes to speak of her as "ugly little Uraca," not even observing that the light figure had taken a softened and more rounded outline, that the free, unfettered movements were beginning to be characterised by girlish grace, and that the irregular features were losing their sallowness and sharpness, and becoming instinct with vivacity and intelligence. Even Uraca had always been credited with fine eyes when everything else had been to her disfavour. They were such a dark grey that they looked black save in

very strong light, and were pencilled in black towards the edge of the iris in a curious fashion. Her brow was low and broad, and the crisp curls of her short hair clustered round it in picturesque boy-fashion, giving something individual and gipsy-like to her appearance. Her features were altogether irregular and original: the nose short and tip-tilted,—"a real snub," as her brother Teddy called it, though Teddy was her warm ally, and frequently told her that she was "worth all the other girls put together;" her mouth was little, and decided in its lines, and there was often a mischievous curve of the red lips which showed plenty of lurking humour. The teeth were white and even, and the chin short and deeply cleft. Altogether it was a face that was both piquant and interesting, but it was not beautiful, nor even pretty, according to the generally received canons of art, and it owed all its attractiveness to the ever-varying and animated expression it wore. No wonder that, beside the dashing beauty and fragile loveliness of her sisters, Uraca's more modest charms had been passed over. Indeed, the girl believed herself to be hopelessly and

irredeemably plain, and had at last given up thinking or troubling her head about the matter.

"Now give me your commissions, good people," she said, as she stood just within the room, perched like a bold robin on the window-ledge. "I will take the children by the shady river walk, and do any errands for anybody in the village."

Staunton was rather proud of its two village shops, and these were patronised with some liberality by the big houses round, who felt it was worth while keeping them up to the mark by frequent dealings. There was also a nice old-fashioned inn, that was something of a curiosity for its ancient ceilings and mantel-shelves, and was a very favourite resort with anglers who came to Staunton for the excellent trout fishing which the place afforded. The trout stream ran right through the extensive grounds of Staunton House, and then wandered through the village in a leisurely fashion, with many twists and turns that gave variety and picturesqueness to the landscape.

Some of the best trout fishing to be had in the West country was in the neighbourhood

of Staunton, and the little place always boasted a certain number of visitors year by year who came on this very ground. Visitors at the "Two Salmon Heads" were frequently noticed and invited out by the neighbouring houses; for Staunton was sufficiently remote and out of the way to make a change of face and novelty of any description welcome to its inhabitants.

But there was no need to dress with any ceremony for a walk to the village. Uraca only put on her big shady garden hat, and took a pair of gauntlet gloves in her hand. The boys made no addition to their easy garden dress, and little Edie's sun-bonnet was placed upon her head, instead of hanging down her back by the strings.

Thus equipped, the little party started off through the shrubbery walk and down the shady hedgerow to the river banks, the little girl dancing along, holding by "Cara's" hand, whilst the boys ran on in front, chasing butterflies, and tumbling each other head over heels in the exuberance of their boyish spirits.

"Tell me the story about your princess," said little Edie, who was never tired of a

tale that once took her fancy. "I think it is so like you, Cara. I think it is just what would happen now if it were to be like that over again."

Uraca laughed as she looked down at the child.

"Why, you know all about it, Puss. It came in your history lesson. But I suspect you only remember just the story part, and not the history too."

"I remember it all," answered the child stoutly. "I 'll show you I do, for I 'll tell you all about it myself."

"That will be much the best way," said Uraca, laughing.

"Well," said the child, composing her mind to the task, "it was like this. King Henry the Second had some sons and daughters. One of his daughters was called Eleonora, and she married King Alphonso of Castile. When they were married they had a lot of daughters. The eldest was called by a long queer name which I forget, the next was called Uraca, and the next Blanche, and there were lots more besides. Well, the eldest one, with the queer name"—

"Berengaria," put in Uraca softly.

"Well, *she* went and got married, and Uraca and Blanche and the rest were left. Oh yes, and then we must go to King John. He was Henry the Second's son, and Eleanor's brother, and he fought for a long time with the King of France—what was his name?"

"Philip," answered Uraca briefly.

"Yes, so it was. Well, after they had fought a long time they got tired of it, and wanted to make peace, and so they had to have conditions, and one of the conditions was that the French King's son should marry one of King John's nieces — they were his nieces, weren't they, Cara?"

"Yes, dear, of course—his sister's children."

"Well, so the French King said he did not mind that, and he sent men with long names beginning with A"—

"Ambassadors."

"Yes, that's it. Well, he sent them to Alphonso's house to look at his daughters, and choose one for the Dolphin Louis."

"Dauphin, dear, not dolphin."

"Well, I don't see any difference. I like dolphin best. So the men went, and when

they saw Uraca they liked her very much; but they said that they couldn't have her, because she had such an ugly name, and so they took Blanche instead, and she was Queen of France for ever such a time, and was what was called the Regent. And I 'm quite sure that Uraca would have been twice as nice and clever if they 'd chosen her; but it just seems as though Uracas were always passed over, and other people always got the best of everything. I 'm quite sure it would be just the same if it were to happen now."

"You silly child! How could it happen now?"

"I know what Edie means," cried Willie, who with his brother had now come up, and had heard the best part of the recapitulated tale. "She means that if anybody were to come here, — anybody in the least nice, or grand, or rich, or anything, and want to have you to marry and take away,—the others are always talking about getting married and going away, so you needn't try to hush me up so,— they 'd be certain to say that you were 'only Uraca,' and make him have one of the others instead. They don't like you to have anything.

They try to shove you out of everything. Oh, I've heard papa and mamma say so, so you needn't look so shocked. Mamma often says it is a horrid shame the way you are sat upon, only she says in other people's houses she can't interfere. I never saw anybody sitting on you myself," concluded Willie, raising his eyes gravely to her face. "I suppose they do that when we're not near to take care of you?"

"I certainly never feel them doing it," answered Uraca, laughing; but her face was a little flushed as she spoke, for she was at a very sensitive age, and it hurt her to think that the slighting and snubbing, of which she was only very dimly conscious herself, should be openly commented upon by others, even if those others were only Tom and his wife. And certainly she felt that they ought not to speak so before the children. Children were such terrible listeners, and one never knew what they would say next, nor to whom their confidences would be given. It was not fair to the others to talk as though they were purposely selfish or unkind. Uraca was very fond of her sisters, and very proud of their beauty. She did not see how it was to be

thought that she could be placed on the same plain with them. Was she not just a plain, unattractive girl, barely out of the schoolroom? Had she not frequently given out that she cared very little for going out or being introduced to society? It was unkind to all of them to speak as though she were neglected or "sat upon;" but it was not a point to be argued with the children. She would speak to Edith in private, and give her a hint about the growing length of her little pitchers' ears.

"I think it was a great shame to call you Uraca at all," said the little Edith, with a solemn upward look at her aunt; "it's a nasty, ugly name, and it isn't even English. I think they were all very unkind to you."

Uraca laughed merrily.

"Shall I tell you the story how I got that name? It was because mamma and the uncles and aunts just *could* not make up their minds what I was to be called. They almost got to quarrelling over it, and at last papa—your grandpapa, you know—said he would have no more of it, and that they would draw lots about it. Everybody might write three names upon three different pieces of paper, and they should

all be shuffled together in a hat, and then somebody should draw, and the first name that came out should be the name, without any more discussion at all. He was a naughty grandpapa himself, for he wrote three very ugly names himself, of which Uraca was one, and that was the first to come out. And that 's how I got my queer name; but I don't think I mind it much now. Uraca Underwood doesn't sound so very bad, and Cara is quite pretty."

"Only that 's our name, and we shan't let anybody else call you so. If anybody tried, I 'd punch his head for him—that I would."

Tommy was the speaker, and Tommy was dancing along backwards, as he was fond of doing, without taking particular heed where he was going. By this time they had left the grounds of their own house behind them, and were walking along the river-side path, that was public to anyone, and which quickly led to the village. As Tommy uttered this last defiant sentiment, he suddenly made a backward stumble, and in another moment would have measured his length on the path, and possibly have rolled into the river too, had he not been caught by a strong arm and set on

his pins again, whilst the stalwart stranger who had emerged from behind the shelter of the bushes to perform this timely service remarked laughingly—

"Before you make so very sure of punching other folks' heads, my little man, you had better look where you are treading yourself. If you had chanced to roll into the river, perhaps your own head might have stood a chance of getting punched by nurse—eh?"

"We don't have no nurse here," cried Tommy, somewhat outraged in his feelings by being treated as a baby by this tall gentleman, who was so very big and brown and handsome. Tommy felt that he should like to grow up into just such a man as this stranger, which made the taunt all the harder to bear. "I shall be a man very soon. Men don't want nurses. It's only Edie who wants nurse, and when we're here Cara takes care of her. It's Edie and Cara coming along now."

For Master Tommy was some paces in advance of his party, and the path was very winding, whilst the thick growth of alders and willows by the water's edge hid the speakers

from the view of the party behind. Now Uraca rounded the bend and saw to whom Tommy was holding forth. It was to a perfect stranger certainly, but a stranger with a fishing rod in his hand was no unusual spectacle at that spot at this time of year, and Uraca was not taken by surprise.

The stranger bared his head as he saw the lady, and Tommy took occasion to say,—

"This gentleman stopped me from tumbling into the water, Cara. I thought perhaps you 'd like to thank him properly. That 's what mamma always does if anybody helps us out of a scrape."

Uraca exchanged an amused glance with the stranger. She was not in the least shy, perhaps, because she was not in the least self-conscious.

"I am very much obliged to you," she said, promptly. "We get quite enough clothes and boots to dry in the ordinary course of things without extra tumbles into the river."

Then the pair bowed and smiled, and Uraca passed on her way ; but Tommy called back,—

"I 'm going to stay and watch him fish. You can pick me up as you go home again."

Uraca hesitated ; but the good-natured stranger said,—

" I will give an eye to him, and return him safe and sound when you claim him. This pool will keep me for quite an hour longer."

So Uraca thanked him and went on her way, hoping for the best when she returned, and sure enough finding her small charge sitting by the handsome stranger and talking away with all his might.

" He 's a soldier and an officer, and he 's home on leave, and he 's staying at the ' Salmon Heads ' with a tutor, fishing sometimes and reading sometimes," cried the excited little boy, when once more alone with Cara. " He 's the splendidest fellow I ever saw in my life. I 'm going to make papa make friends with him, and bring him home to dinner. Cara, I just think he 'd do for a husband for you, and I 'll tell him so one of these days. I told him ever such a lot of things, and he liked hearing about them very much."

CHAPTER III.

THE STRANGERS.

"YOU mustn't say it to him, Tommy."

"Do you mean really, Cara?"

"I mean really and truly, Tommy. It would be very silly, and very impertinent, too."

"But he's so like a fairy prince," urged Tommy, and the fairy princes always marry the nice sister, and leave the others in a jolly wax. I want that to happen here, and I think I might just whisper to him that *you* are the nice one out of them all, and then see what he does afterwards."

Uraca was putting the finishing touches to her simple dinner dress, and the children had come in, as it was their habit to do, to say good-night on their way to bed. It was the evening following the encounter upon the river banks, and Mr Underwood and his married son had lost no time in calling upon the strangers, and asking them up to a friendly dinner the

same day. They had taken a great liking to Lieutenant Mannesty, and thought him a remarkably fine fellow. The quiet tutor was included in the invitation as a matter of courtesy, but neither of the gentlemen had particularly observed him.

"A small stunted bookworm sort of chap," Tom Underwood had said when questioned; "a gentleman and an Oxford man, I believe, but with nothing at all to say for himself."

Mannesty was the hero of the occasion, and it was his length and strength of limb and his merry talk that had so won the youthful Tommy's heart. The meeting having come just after the talk wherein he had declared it his opinion that Uraca would never be permitted to have a prince or a real live lover of her own, the three children were sure that this stranger must have been placed in their path by some kind fairy just on purpose for their darling Cara. They had so often placed her in a fine palace of her own, to which they would have free access any time they desired, that they felt it time the dream should be realised. And what better fairy prince (the necessary adjunct to such a plan) than this tall soldier, with his

handsome face and cheery manner? Tommy had felt quite confident of getting everything put right if only he might do and say what he chose, and now Cara had distinctly forbidden him to speak a single word—forbidden him in a fashion that showed her to be in earnest. It was very disappointing, for he knew he must not really vex Cara; but perhaps he would think of some better plan by and by, and meantime he must go to bed, which was a rather tame ending to his fine projects.

Uraca laughed softly as the door closed behind the two boys. Edie had gone to bed some time before.

"The little rogues! What a good thing they came and told me all their precious intentions! It strikes me that Edith will have a time of it with those boys of hers as they grow older! There is no knowing what they will say or do."

With one glance into the mirror to see that her flowers were securely pinned, Uraca turned away and wandered down towards the drawing-room. She felt comparatively little interest in the strangers who were coming. She had thought that Lieutenant Mannesty (if that was his name) had been very kind to Tommy by

the river, and he was undoubtedly very handsome, but she was not sure if it was the handsome men who were the most interesting, and she knew that she would hardly be likely to exchange a single word with him during the whole of the evening. There would be so many to talk to—and her sisters were so much more attractive.

The room was quite silent as she opened the door. Voices from the garden without told her that some of the party must be there. She was hesitating whether or not to join them, when she observed that the room was not empty. A man who was quite a stranger to her was standing in one of the windows, and as he heard the light footstep in the room he turned quickly round, and Uraca saw his face.

There was nothing remarkable in it. It was colourless, composed, and even expressionless, as she thought.

"The tutor, of course," she said to herself, and after a moment's hesitation (for she knew little of the ways of society) she held out her hand.

"How do you do?" was her demure greeting, which was as school-girlish as her

appearance. "I wonder if you find Staunton as dull a place as some of the visitors do?"

"I do not come as a visitor exactly," answered the young man in a clear, low-toned voice that Uraca thought rather pleasant, and certainly very refined in accent. "I have come with my—my pupil. My work will keep me occupied. One is never dull when one's time is fully employed."

Uraca gave him a quick, bright glance, her whole face lighting up wonderfully.

"I'm so glad to hear somebody else say that. They all laugh at me when I do."

"Who laugh?" asked the tutor, whose name she did not know, with a faint smile playing round the corners of his lips.

"My sisters," answered Uraca, laughing. "I am the youngest, you see, and not supposed to know anything. I suppose it *is* rather dull here in the winter. You see it is not a good hunting place, the ground is too much cut up by streams and ravines, and there is not so very much going on after October or November. But I have always plenty to do, so that it does not make much difference to me."

By this time the sound of returning voices

was very near, and through the open window the party came streaming back into the room.

Edna led the way, talking with pretty eagerness to handsome Lieutenant Mannesty; and a quick thrill of admiration ran through the frame of the younger sister as she realised, as possibly she had hardly done before, the exceeding loveliness of her elder sister Violet, who was just behind. Both were taking part in the discussion. It was not intellectual talk, or even interesting, apart from the charm of the two speakers; but trivialities can sound charming when spoken by such lovely lips, and Mannesty's face expressed a good deal of pleasure and satisfaction.

There is a charm about a thoroughly English home that appeals very forcibly to men who have lived far away from their native land, and have mixed in the society to be found in Indian stations or in large foreign towns. This charm was exercising itself with some considerable effect upon the two young men now in Mrs Underwood's pretty drawing-room. Both of these had been travellers, both had been men of somewhat wide experience, and both were feeling the fascination of being thus re-

ceived, with friendly cordiality, into the midst of a family party so attractive and so refined as that of the Underwoods of Staunton House.

Uraca caught the glance which the young tutor bent upon her fair sisters as they came in almost together. She read the quick and keen admiration which flashed from his eyes, and for a moment she wondered what the power could be like that won homage as a natural right, and without the smallest effort on the part of the winner. There was no envy in Uraca's heart, but a sympathetic curiosity. Did her sisters know how beautiful they were, and knowing it, did they value the gift?

At the dinner-table Uraca found herself beside the tutor still. He had taken in Edna, but as the officer (who had led in the lady of the house) was upon the beauty's other side, it was not probable that her partner would get much of her attention. Uraca began to feel a little sorry for Mr Ratcliff, as she now knew his name to be. It began, she thought, to be a little too obvious that he was regarded purely as an appendage of his pupil's. Not that anybody was in the least rude, but nobody took any interest in him, and he was practically

ignored. He was so very quiet that this might in part have been his own fault, and he had no appearance of wishing to take a share in the conversation, or in any way obtrude himself. Mr Mannesty had been offered the empty seat in the carriage on Friday to go with the Staunton party to the fête at the Grange, and he had gratefully accepted, whilst his tutor had not even been named, though, as there was but one seat in the carriage, this was natural enough.

But Uraca felt sympathy for any person left out in the cold. She had never really admitted, even to herself, that this was her own case; she was used to look upon it as the natural result of being the youngest, and the fourth unmarried daughter at home. Yet her quick sympathies went out to the lonely tutor, who was so plain and insignificant, and so little noticed (just like herself), and she exerted herself to talk to him, and try to make the time pass pleasantly.

In the drawing-room afterwards she had little leisure to devote to him, for she was kept at the piano almost all the time playing accompaniments to her sisters' songs. The

Underwoods were all musical, and so was their guest, and great pains had been taken with the singing of Edna and Violet, so that it was a pleasure to listen to them. Mannesty could also sing well, and Uraca had the gift of accompanying any song the air of which she knew, so that she seldom left her seat by the piano, even though there was plenty of talk between the songs. Her voice was not often heard then, though she would follow the talk with quick interest, and sometimes throw in a bright word of her own, or supply a forgotten name or date when her sisters were speaking. It was Uraca who was sent to look for missing music: Uraca who jumped up and ran to the door when a cry from the nurseries above told that there was trouble of some kind there; Uraca who was called to disentangle Mrs Tom's embroidery silks, and to find her father's missing spectacles.

Anna, Edna, and Violet each played a part of their own in the pretty little domestic drama of everyday life, but their parts were very different from Uraca's. And there was one silent, attentive watcher of this same domestic drama who took in every detail, and marked

every incident in his own quiet fashion, not drawing any conclusions as yet, but gathering data from which to draw them bye and by.

Later on in the evening, when the talk was in full swing, and Uraca, from her station on the music-stool, was listening to what passed, as she struck a few soft chords from time to time, or hummed a snatch of one of the songs lately sung, she was surprised, and for a moment half startled, to hear herself addressed —startled not by the loudness of the voice, for it was in fact very low, but because she thought that all the rest of the company were far enough away.

"Do you not sing yourself, Miss Uraca?"

She turned round quickly, to find Mr Ratcliff standing behind her.

"Not in the drawing-room—at least, only when papa and I are left alone together by chance. I have never learned, like the rest. They tell me I do not know how to produce my voice. I only sing to the children, and to the poor people sometimes, when the vicar gets up Penny Readings. People who are not particular can put up with me, but I never

sing to 'company';" and Uraca laughed at her own term.

"Don't you like singing?"

Her eyes brightened with quick enthusiam.

"I love it!" she answered impetuously. "I feel sometimes, when I have heard a really grand singer holding an audience spellbound, that that must be one of the highest pleasures life has to give. I don't think I should care just to amuse and please fashionable people, who could hear good music every day of their lives. But I should like—oh! more than I could say, if I only had the voice and the training—to sing to hundreds and thousands of *poor* people—not the pampered and petted poor, who are often, I think, made a great deal too much of nowadays, but the really poor—the *wicked*, degraded poor (does that sound shocking?) who are wicked and degraded because they know nothing better and higher, because they have lived steeped in evil all their lives, and their hearts have never been touched. I feel as though I might have a message for them—a message that I could never say, but that I might sing to them. Some of them have had homes of their own

once. Some of them have had mothers who, when they were children, must have sung to them some of the dear old-fashioned songs and ballads—yes, and hymns—which people turn up their noses at now. I would sing those to them again. They are worth all the new, jingly, clap-trap things put together, and I know I could touch some hearts like that. They would think of the old days when they were children, before they had fallen into sin and crime. They would remember the times, perhaps"—

Uraca stopped suddenly, for her name had been quickly spoken from the other end of the room, and she was sent off on an errand for her sisters which took some time to execute, and when she returned the guests were just leaving.

There was a good deal of talk about them when they had gone—about the handsome soldier, that is, who was regarded by the boys as "a rattling good fellow," and by the girls as a most fascinating man. Nobody had much to say about the tutor, who had hardly spoken at all during the evening. Anna said that she had tried to talk to him at dinner-time and

had found him hopelessly irresponsive, though Gerald observed that Uraca had seemed to get on with him better. He had seen them talking several times together.

"I suspect that Uraca did all the talking herself," remarked Anna, with elder-sisterly candour. "I caught her in the middle of some terrible nonsense, when I had the kindness to despatch her out of the room." Then, taking the girl by the arm, and going off with her up-stairs, she continued, laughing, "Now don't go and look so fierce and red, little one. Girls out of the schoolroom are always making small blunders just at first, talking rubbish without knowing it, and making themselves ridiculous when they think they are being very grown-up. But grave, sarcastic, and clever young Oxford men are not the kind it is quite safe to practise upon. You'd better leave Mr Ratcliff alone. He's not the kind to take kindly to immature flirtation, and besides"—

Uraca had flushed crimson, now she turned almost pale.

"Anna, how dare you say such things to me? How dare you speak such horrid words? Flirtation, indeed! You know it was nothing

of the kind. I hate and despise everything like that."

"Well, well, child, don't go and get into such a fume about it. I only say that it looked like that. Of course, if it was earnest, it is in one way more serious. You know, Uraca, you can't possibly think of marrying a poor man, and you may just as well know it first as last. Papa has no dowry to give with his daughters, and unless they marry money they cannot marry at all, for neither he nor mamma will dream of consenting to any silly, romantic love-match. I can do as I please; I have Aunt Laura's money now, thank goodness, and can afford to be romantic if I like. But none of the rest of you can, and you may just as well know this at starting, since you are such a romantic, enthusiastic, and hot-headed child, and there is no knowing what you will say or do next."

Uraca gave her sister a quick, wondering glance, but said nothing. She had never in her life thought about marriage, and the caution seemed utterly superfluous. She was still hurt and angry at having been called a flirt, but she knew by experience

that it was useless trying to argue with Anna.

So she broke away, and went on into her own room, whilst Anna shut herself into hers, and, sitting down in a comfortable chair by the window, spoke half aloud,—

"The 'ugly duckling' seems to be coming out in a new light. Indeed, she was quite attractive when she was animated this evening; but I really cannot afford to have a third taking sister in the field before me. Uraca has twice the wits of Edna and Violet put together, and might be really more dangerous as a rival. I wonder what I had better do? It's an odd thing that, with my good looks and prospective fortune, which is now prospective no longer, but an accomplished fact, I have never had an offer from any man whom I would look at. Of course, this place is very lonely and out-of-the-way, and the few visitors who come are but birds of passage; still, with ordinary good fortune, one of us might have married by this time, and Edna and Violet are beauties, though they have nothing whatever in them beside their good looks. I wonder really if I had better think seriously

of Mr Ratcliff? There is something in his face that rather takes me, though I 'm sure I could not say why, unless perhaps I have had a surfeit of mere outward beauty in the home party. He has brains, of course, and I think I have a fair share myself; then he is a gentleman, and a University scholar always commands a standing of his own. I daresay papa would not quite like it, and the boys would gibe and jeer; but really I should not much mind that. I 'm getting about tired of this sort of thing, though it did very well for a time, but I 've had enough of it. The handsome young lieutenant is a little too young for me, even if he would look my way, which I doubt, seeing that the younger ones are already his adoring admirers. But the tutor is presumably considerably older. One can't easily form a guess as to the age of that kind of man, but I daresay he is seven or eight and twenty. I think he could be interesting if he had a mind to be, and no doubt he would like to marry an intelligent woman of fortune, and settle down to a quiet studious life in Oxford. That would suit me very well. There is capital society to be had there, and

I think I should make a mark. It is worth considering, and I certainly will think it well over."

Friday, with its garden party, came and went. Mannesty was taken to it by his new friends, and introduced to a number of people, who all received him very kindly. There was an air of prosperity about the young man that added considerably to the impression his good looks and easy manners made upon those with whom he came in contact. He was quite ready to settle for a time in the comfortable inn at Staunton, he told people. He intended sending for some horses and his cart and his guns. He had been wandering about the country with his tutor for several weeks, but they had decided that they would do better now to settle down for a time, and Staunton seemed just about as good a place as they could choose. The fishing was excellent; in a very short time the shooting would begin; game seemed plentiful; and the people about were most hospitable and friendly. All who saw him were pleased by the gallant bearing and frank speech of the young soldier, and when he rejoined his friend for their late dinner his spirits were excellent.

"I like this place awfully, Rat; I think it'll about do for us. We shall get plenty of shooting and fun; and we shan't beat those Underwood girls in a hurry. How do you feel about it?"

"I quite agree with you. I feel like stopping too."

"I've been cracking you up a whole lot this afternoon. If anybody would find 'honest worth' enough, they ought to know they will get it in you. Miss Underwood appeared rather fetched by some of my remarks, and asked a good bit about you. I fenced very neatly, I think; and of course nobody knows that our friendship is anything but that of a few weeks' growth. I say, though, Rat, aren't those two younger girls real beauties? If they had a little more sense in their lovely heads, I believe I should fall in love myself. I am almost in love with both when I'm with them. You might really see what you could do with one of them. Your parents would be enchanted with a daughter-in-law like that."

"I'm going to cultivate the family," answered Ratcliff quietly. "They interest me, and I

don't know that we could get better material anywhere else. They have beauty, gentle birth, accomplishments—all, in fact, that one could reasonably want; but whether I shall find more than that, or whether they will condescend to look at the humble tutor, is quite another matter."

"True, we must see about that. And what have you been doing all your lonely afternoon?"

"I was not lonely at all. I went out into the wood, and fell in with your little friend Tommy, and his sister and brother, and Miss Uraca, who were having a picnic tea out there. The children asked me to join them, which I did for a time. We had a good deal of fun. I like watching kids at their work and their play, they are so refreshingly in earnest. That small Tommy of yours is quite a character. He treated me to some delectable bits of family history. Indeed, he let me behind the scenes in a remarkable manner. It seems, Mannesty, that you are playing a very important part in his youthful day-dreams just now."

"I? Why?"

"I 'm not sure that it would not be a breach of confidence to tell you. He was intending to reveal it all to you himself, but that he was forbidden to do so by the lady whom it chiefly concerns."

"The lady? This becomes interesting. Fire away, old man. You have said too much not to say more."

"Well, then, to be brief, he has concocted a romance, of which you are to be the fairy prince and Miss Uraca the princess, when she is rescued from her Cinderella position in her family by your gallantry and faithful love."

Mannesty leaned back and laughed heartily.

"Miss Uraca, of all people in the world! What! the 'ugly duckling,' as somebody said she was called?"

"The same," answered Ratcliff very quietly; adding, after a few moments' silence, "For my part, I 'm not sure that the 'ugly duckling' is not going to turn out the most interesting member of the whole family."

CHAPTER IV.

A TENNIS TOURNAMENT.

"I WISH papa would not do such stupid things!"

"Why, what has he done now?"

"Oh, don't you know? Didn't you hear? He has asked the little stupid to play in the tennis tournament, and he said he would; so now papa says one of us girls must ask him for a partner, as it would not do for him to have any trouble about that, after saying he would play, and nobody else knows him."

Violet was the speaker — Violet with the half-appealing, half-fretful voice. Mrs Tom laughed, and told her she had better ask him herself.

"I'm sure I won't," was the quick reply. "I never did profess to have the smallest interest in him; I have never even tried to talk to him. I am sure he is hopelessly stupid. If anybody takes him, it ought to be Anna. She professes

she can find something in him, and I'm sure none of the rest of us can."

"Oh, I draw the line at the tournament," cried Anna, in her gaily imperious tones; "I'm not going to be made a fool of in public —not for anything or anybody. Besides I really want to win. That bracelet Lady Egan has offered for the prize is lovely, and would go most beautifully with my new set, which is not quite large enough as it is. I mean to win, and I shall take Tom for my partner. He may not be as finished in style as some of the others, but he is a particularly safe player, and he and I nearly always carry all before us when we play together. Edna has hooked the soldier, of course,—she looks upon him pretty well as her own private property,—so I shall have Tom. I'm not going to spoil my chances of victory for any fad of papa's, or to gratify anybody's vanity. He should not have asked him, that's the long and the short of it. Why, no one even knows if he can hold a bat at all."

"He must be able to do that, or he would not have consented to play," said good-natured Mrs Tom. "I think your father was quite

right to include him in the invitation. I call it rather too bad the way he's kind of shouldered out of everything."

"I don't see that," said Violet. "I'm sure he's always here. If he doesn't do what the rest of us do, it's his own fault. He shouldn't be such a gaby."

"Oh, he's all very well in his own way," put in Anna, with an air of lofty condescension that implied a sense of untold superiority. "I get on with him tolerably well on the whole. But one must draw the line somewhere, and I draw it at a tennis match. I really can't stand up beside such a little owl as that. I should feel perfectly ridiculous."

"What would make you feel ridiculous?" asked a new voice from behind.

"Why, to play the tennis tournament with Mr Ratcliff," was the quick answer. "Papa has been silly enough to ask him if he would care to play in it, and he has been stupid enough to say that he will. And when I told papa that nobody would play with him, he said that of course one of us girls must. And I've just said I won't; neither will Edna nor Violet. So you'll have to do it, Uraca. You won't mind,

will you? You'll be a well-matched pair of 'ugly ducklings.'"

"Oh, I say, that's rather too hard on Uraca," cried Mrs Tom. "She plays so well, and she has so little fun; it's a shame to handicap her like that."

"I don't mind, Edith, thank you," answered Uraca's clear voice. "I would much rather play with Mr Ratcliff than that he should feel in the least left out in the cold. Indeed, I should like him quite as well as any partner. He has always been very kind to me."

The speakers were all on one side of a thick yew hedge—the hedge which divided the garden of Staunton House from a field-path leading away from it. This field-path was public, and was regularly used by persons coming to and fro; and as the girls walked and talked upon one side of the hedge, two young men were walking abreast of them upon the other, and were of necessity obliged to hear every word that passed.

For some minutes they had not objected to play the part of involuntary listeners. No names had been mentioned, and the designation of "little stupid" which had headed the conversa-

tion had fallen with no special signification upon the ears of the pair. They were rather amused at the "dressing" the unfortunate was having at the hands of these somewhat merciless young ladies, but it did not occur to them to trouble their heads as to whom was meant amongst all the circle of men in the place.

But the moment that the name had passed the lips of Anna, a change came over both the amused faces. Ratcliff had quickly laid a hand upon his companion's arm, and had hurried him away, saying in a low tone as he did so,—

"We ought not to be listening. I had no idea they were speaking of—me."

Still, hurry as they would, they could not but hear the sentences which immediately followed, and when they were safely out of ear-shot, Mannesty broke into a ringing laugh.

"The 'little stupid'—'never had a bat in his hand before!' Rat, my boy, I think you will make some of them open their eyes when the day of this wonderful tournament arrives."

Ratcliff's face wore a peculiar expression. Possibly no one hears disparaging remarks levelled at him without a certain natural distaste, yet there was more of humorous apprecia-

tion and amusement in the gleam of the grey eyes than either vexation or wounded vanity. Indeed, he appeared quite unmoved by these strictures upon himself. Perhaps he was not sorry for the chance which had revealed something of the true sentiments of those about him.

"I thought better of that Miss Underwood," said Mannesty, with a smile and a frown; "she seemed a cut above the rest in sense and good feeling. The little plain one always behaves herself, but somehow one hardly sees anything of her. As Mrs Tom just said, she seems to get so little of the fun. I'm glad she will be playing in the tournament. I say, Rat, if she plays anything like well, and picks you for a partner, it strikes me that you will pretty well have everything your own way."

Ratcliff smiled slightly.

"I don't know about that altogether. I shall have to beat you first, old fellow."

"Oh, well, you can do that easy in a single, and I shall be handicapped, it seems, by Miss Edna, who is no such great shakes. I don't believe that she plays half as well as the 'ugly duckling,' though I've never seen that girl play; but she looks springy and alert all over,

and everything else of that sort that she does she does well."

"Well, she shall have the bracelet if I can help her to it," said Ratcliff coolly. "But we don't know what our opponents may be like yet, you know."

Mannesty shrugged his shoulders in a fine contempt.

"I don't believe any of these country bumpkins know what real play is. It's not tennis at all—it's only pat-ball."

Ratcliff gave an amused whistle.

"So that's your opinion of country pursuits? How pleased our good friends would be to hear you!"

Mannesty laughed at that, but would not recant.

"It's all true enough. I don't mean anything against the people. The girls are very pretty, and the parents very hospitable, and I'm enjoying myself immensely; but to call their games tennis—! no wonder you never cared to take a bat! Well, I shall be glad for them to see for once what tennis can be like."

"I might have taken a bat if I had been asked," said Ratcliff, with his slight, indefinite

smile; "but my hopeless inferiority was taken as a matter of course."

And then they both laughed, and strolled on to their inn, where for a wonder they were going to dine that evening.

Things at Staunton were done in free and easy fashion long after they had ceased to be so informally conducted in other places. A tournament had only once been held there, and then the girls had been allowed to select each her own partner, and it appeared that this easy method was to be adopted again. It might be a little invidious, but it suited the girls excellently, and the first tournament had been accounted a great success, and had been quite exciting to players and spectators alike. There was a general outcry when somebody suggested that drawing lots was the fairer and the more generally approved fashion, and so much clamour had been raised against the innovation that the author of the unwelcome suggestion had been glad to let it drop.

When Mannesty and his "tutor" had appeared that day at the hospitable house of the Underwoods, there had been nothing talked of but the coming match. It had been taken for

granted that Lieutenant Mannesty would play in it, but none of the young people had thought of including the tutor amongst the players until Mr Underwood, in his hearty fashion, had asked whether the young man would not take a part, and had received an answer in the affirmative.

It was with no little amusement and some slight surprise that Ratcliff had heard himself discussed in such contemptuous terms by the people who had shown themselves very fairly friendly on the whole. He was not morbidly sensitive to criticism. He knew that young people, when chatting unrestrainedly together, often spoke more severely than they felt, and that they did not pick their words with any care. Still, there was something strange in hearing quite such frank expressions of scorn. He had been accustomed of late to a rather delicate species of flattery from the lips of women, and though, from the salutary experience he had already been through, he was not disposed to rate this very high, still it was not altogether without effect, and he had scarcely been prepared to hear himself sneered at so very unmistakably.

Of late Miss Underwood appeared to have had some decided interest in him. She had sought him out on several occasions, and had made a point of being civil to him when they met. She had often tried to get him to talk about himself and his life, and his plans and prospects. This argued that she must feel some kindly interest in him, but it did not seem from her words of to-day that that interest went very far. Of the youngest daughter of the house he had seen very little since the first few days. When they did meet, there was something attractive to him in her simple manners, frank goodwill, and eager animation whenever her feelings were stirred; but she appeared to be kept a good deal in the background. She was much with the children for one thing, and several times had been absent from the dinner-table because her presence there would make the party thirteen, and Mrs Underwood disliked sitting down that number. So, with one thing and another, he could hardly have been said to have made much way with the "ugly duckling," though there were many occasions when he felt that they two were treated in very much the same slighting way.

Next day, towards evening, the two strolled up to the gabled house, to find an eager company assembled upon the lawn round the two tennis nets. As the young men appeared, Edna tripped daintily forth to meet them, and, passing Ratcliff by almost without notice, she gave her whole attention to his handsome companion.

"Mr Mannesty, you know about the tennis tournament, do you not? And you know that we have to choose our partners? Well, I have chosen you. I want to know if you will play with me. Will you? You know you need not feel obliged to say Yes, if you would rather have somebody else;" and this was said with such a charming little air of arch coquetry that Mannesty was half fascinated and subjugated, although he had long ago found out that Miss Edna had not much to recommend her except her exceedingly dainty prettiness.

"I am too much honoured by your selection," he answered, with a smile and a bow. "I feel that I am rewarded far above my merits. I can only say that I will fight my hardest to bring you out victorious in the end."

She looked at him with admiration and content.

"I almost think we have a good chance. You do play so very well, and they all say that you could play even better if you tried. And you will try in the tournament?"

"I certainly will," he answered, smiling under his moustache.

Uraca was standing a little way off, with her racquet in her hand. Her eyes were fixed upon Ratcliff's face. She had avoided him somewhat since Anna's sisterly rebuke on the subject of flirtation, but to-day she was not only permitted, but desired to make an advance.

Presently she moved forward and said,—

"Mr Ratcliff, I wonder if you would play with me in the tournament? I should be so much obliged if you would."

He looked at her, meeting her clear, fearless gaze, and his rare smile crossed his face, lighting it up, till Uraca wondered why people thought him so plain.

"Do you really wish it, Miss Uraca?"

"I really do, if you would not mind. I am not such a good player as some of them—I do not get very much practice: but I will do my best to make a fight of it."

"But you know nothing at all of my play.

Are you not rather rash to take such a partner on trust?"

"I should like to play with you, if you will have me," she answered simply. "I know you said you would play if you could find a partner. Have you found one already?"

"No, Miss Uraca; I think the other ladies are wiser than you—they do not care to make a leap in the dark. Are you sure you are prepared to abide by the consequences? I have scarcely touched a racquet this season."

"Well, and I have not played much," answered Uraca, laughing; "so we shall be very much in the same boat there. We will stand by one another, then, and do the best we can not to disgrace ourselves?"

"You are sure you are prepared to take the consequences?"

"Quite sure," answered Uraca, with a lighting up of her whole face; and after a moment's silence she added naïvely, "I never expect to win anything; but some people, of course, must be the ones to be beaten. I don't think I mind it much—if we can only manage to make a decent fight at first."

"We will certainly try to do that," answered Ratcliff, smiling. "And now shall we go and join our little friends over there? They will regard me as a natural enemy if I rob them too much of your companionship."

"We will go to them, unless you want to practise tennis," answered Uraca, looking at him doubtfully. "I thought you might like to play, as you have had so little chance this season,"

"Well, just now both courts seem occupied," said Ratcliff; "and I don't know that just a few games do any good to one. I can have a single or two with my pupil down at the inn. They have a bit of a lawn there. Here the competition is rather keen for the courts."

Seeing that he did not appear to care, Uraca did not press the matter, and so it came about that when the day arrived for the first ties to be played off, she had never played a single game with her partner, or even seen how he could play.

Yet she thought there was something workmanlike in the way he rolled up his sleeves and handled his bat, as they walked forward together to their own ground. She had never

seen him in flannels before, and she thought he looked decidedly well. What a pity it was that Tom and Anna were their opponents! It gave them no chance at all. These two were flushed with victory already, having beaten several strong couples. They had had a good rest, and were perfectly fresh for more conquest, and had the advantage of being familiar with the ground, and having the choice of courts. Uraca was sorry to feel that they would not have the satisfaction of winning a single set, but she said nothing to discourage her partner.

"You would like to win, I suppose?" he said, as they stood together in readiness for their opponents' ball.

"Of course I should," she answered, with a laugh; and then the game began.

Tom was serving, and his service was very strong. Uraca returned the ball with difficulty; but as it was sent back to them, her partner volleyed it, and Anna—missed it. She gave a short laugh.

"Well placed, Mr Ratcliff;" and the kindly condescension of the tone was unmistakable.

Ratcliff received the next ball, and it did not come back to them again; Tom had been un-

able to touch it. Several of the spectators exchanged glances of surprise and amusement. Uraca was astonished.

She missed the next stroke herself, but when Ratcliff received the service, the same thing happened. He placed the ball where neither of his opponents could touch it. The game was quickly over, their enemies having only scored thirty.

"I think you shall serve first, Mr Ratcliff," said Uraca, her eyes dancing with amusement; and the result was a love game for herself and her partner, not a single ball served by Ratcliff having been returned by their adversaries. Anna bit her lip, and Tom laughed aloud.

It would be wearisome to go through the details of that set. Ratcliff simply carried everything before him. Not one of his balls in a dozen was returned, and whenever he served it was certain to be a love game in his favour. His balls simply could not be touched. Spectators grew quite excited, and the court where he was playing was the mark for all eyes.

"Game and set!" cried the spectators at

last, and a clamour of applause went round. Anna's handsome face was flushed with vexation; she was greatly annoyed at being out of the tournament, and still more annoyed at the blunder she had made. Why did she not ask Ratcliff to play with her? She might have guessed that an Eton and Oxford man would be efficient at games. She would have given anything to be playing with such a partner as that; such a well-matched couple in the matter of play—for Anna's was very good, though it could not touch his—would have been the admiration of all beholders. She might so easily have won that distinction, and she had just thrown it away out of ignorance and vanity. It was altogether too galling; and as she stood amongst the crowd of spectators, and saw her younger sister carrying all before her, and playing with a *verve* and spirit that only success and the backing-up of a thorough master of the game can give, she gnawed her lip in impotent anger, and hated herself and everybody else for the scurvy trick that fortune had played her.

The last tie between Mannesty and Edna and Ratcliff and Uraca was as pretty a bit of

play as could well be imagined. Mannesty had not been guilty of any exaggeration in saying that play as it was held in these parts, in their sense of the word was not play, and he had had almost as easy a course of victory as his comrade until they came to be pitted against each other. Then it was indeed a fine sight. The girls only interfered when it was necessary; the game was really played out between the two men. Uraca was growing a little weary with her many fights, so that Edna, who was, comparatively speaking, fresh, was quite her match—though at home, when there was no stimulus from spectators, the younger sister could almost always beat her. But the trial of skill and strength between the two men was a sight to see — Mannesty having the longer reach and the greater amount of muscle, whilst Ratcliff was distinctly the quicker and more agile, and could place his balls with more absolute precision. Whether by set purpose or not (Mannesty thought he was not putting out his full powers earlier in the game), the score ran up almost stroke for stroke and game for game. The side who had the service always won, and at last the games were "five

all," and it was Mannesty's service, which was almost as good as Ratcliff's.

"I 'm afraid we are done for now," said Uraca, turning her bright face upon Ratcliff; "but I don't care a bit—it has been such a splendid fight. Oh, how you must have laughed when I asked you if you did not want to practise with me! I think I never knew what tennis was before to-day."

"We will win if we can, Miss Uraca," said Ratcliff quietly. "Try and return the first ball if possible. Stand well back, and go at it with a fierce swipe. If you can but return that, I think I can promise you the game."

Uraca braced herself to the task. She had succeeded sometimes in tackling that difficult service, but she never felt safe of doing so; still, she kept her head, followed her partner's advice, and sent the ball skimming back, with a strong screw upon it, right to the outer line of the court.

"Good!" said Ratcliff, approvingly; for though Mannesty cleverly took and returned it, he volleyed it back, and Edna tried in vain to touch it. The next ball was his, and came back no more. In a few more minutes the

tournament was over, and Uraca and her partner had won.

A round of applause followed them as they walked away from the courts; and Uraca said, with a happy laugh, "After all, success is *very* nice."

CHAPTER V.

ANNA'S RESOLVE.

IT was a pretty sight to watch Uraca's bright face as she came up to receive Lady Egan's prize at the close of the afternoon. Uraca was the least known of all the Underwood sisters, having only quite recently emerged from the schoolroom, where she had been kept in seclusion longer than her sisters had been; but she generally made friends when she did appear, for her brightness and unaffected good-nature were very apparent and very pleasing, and beauty has, after all, only a secondary place in the estimation of our friends, although it is a gift that is capable of bestowing much pleasure, and has a distinct value of its own.

Upon that bright August afternoon Uraca found herself famous. It was a new sensation to her, and she enjoyed new experiences with the zest that is youth's prerogative, and won

herself many friends by her frank delight in her own success, which she did not attempt to undervalue or explain away. Her partner, Mr Ratcliff, suddenly assumed a position of more importance than he had hitherto held in the eyes of the community, and a faint smile sometimes appeared upon his face as he realised that his tennis-playing had won for him a standing which no other quality possessed by him had done, and which certainly had not been accorded to him for any personal or intellectual merit.

It seemed as if Uraca divined with instinctive insight and sympathy some of the thoughts which flitted through his brain in this hour of unlooked-for triumph ; and once, when they were alone together for a few moments, she turned her bright face towards him and said,—

"Do you think us all very foolish and shallow and flippant?"

"Why should I think anything so ungallant and sweeping?"

"Oh, I cannot help feeling as though you did; we make such a lot of a victory, which is, after all, only part of a game—which can-

not really make us either better or worse. We are the same two people we have always been; but to-day everybody notices us and praises us, and but for the tennis I don't suppose"—

She stopped short for a moment, laughing and blushing, and he took up the word and quietly finished the sentence.

"That we should ever have been noticed at all—two insignificant creatures like ourselves. Well, Miss Uraca, we must be thankful for small mercies. If we have nothing in ourselves to recommend us to our neighbours, we will make the most of our inferior accomplishments, such as the playing of games."

Uraca laughed brightly. Somehow it pleased her to hear him talk of "us" and "we." She found it very pleasant to think of them as being "companions in adversity."

"Just so, and that makes me think that you must rather despise us in your heart for making such a lot of something which is, after all, only an accidental detail."

He turned and looked straight at her, and she saw his eyes better than she had ever

done before, and was struck with the peculiar look of power in them.

"If I thought some few of those hard things about some of our friends here," he said, with his slight peculiar smile, "I certainly could not for a moment include you amongst that number."

A quick flush mounted to her face.

"I am so glad," she said brightly; "I don't think I should like you to think me frivolous."

He returned her look with one she did not entirely understand.

"Do you care at all what I think, Miss Uraca?"

"Yes, I think I do," she answered frankly; "you have always been kind to me. Some people think me a child still, and never care to notice me. I think I like being noticed. I am sure I like to be talked to—and to talk (is that very foolish and forward?). And then you do play tennis most splendidly, and I do like to see anybody do any one thing very well indeed,—as well as it can be done,—even though it is only a game. I should like to excel myself in anything I try to do, and I like to see anybody else excel too."

"Which is a very different thing," answered Ratcliff, with one of his quick fleeting glances; "many people can be found who like to excel themselves, but there are few who care to witness the like success in others."

"Oh, but that is mean and unworthy," answered Uraca, with quick heat. "Surely the next best thing to excelling oneself is to see somebody else doing so? It is not given to everybody to achieve success, but everybody can share in the pleasure of seeing another succeed. You are not one of the people, are you, Mr Ratcliff, who think the worst of human nature, and believe that the world is altogether mean and unworthy?"

"No, I am not," he answered; "but I think that the evil and the good are struggling together for mastery in these days as perhaps they have never before done to such an extent in the whole of the world's history. It makes one feel sometimes as though one ought to walk with wide-open eyes, striving to read aright the riddles of the day: for every man should know on which side he is ranging himself, and it is often a fearfully difficult

thing to disentangle the evil from the good, and know under which banner we are serving."

Uraca's whole face kindled with interest. It was so seldom that she found anybody to talk seriously with her—anybody who appeared to look upon life as anything but an easy, placid sort of thing, to be made as pleasant and comfortable as possible, and kept free from all needless cares and worries. She had often been laughed at for "taking things so seriously," for trying to dig beneath the surface. She had been told she was much too young and foolish to know what she was talking about, and when nobody about her proved the least responsive, the girl had gradually got into the way of locking up her thoughts within her own mind, and keeping quiet about them.

And now she was suddenly made aware that she was not the only person who thought seriously of life and its outlook, and a vivid interest was at once aroused within her. This was neither the time nor the place for grave talk; neither did Uraca altogether know what it was she wanted to say or to ask. But she

felt for the first time in her life the electric thrill of an unspoken comprehension and sympathy, and the sensation was as new as it was unexpected, and so wonderfully sweet that she was almost afraid of the feeling it evoked. She would have tried to find some words to say in response, but they were joined at the moment by other persons, and Uraca was summoned to receive her prize at the hands of kind Lady Egan, the county magnate, who, when visiting these parts of the world, generally contrived to make her visits pleasantly remembered.

As for Anna, she was passing through some decidedly unwelcome impressions that day. In the first place, she was consumed with vexation at having failed to take the despised Mr Ratcliff for her partner, and so have secured herself the prize of the afternoon, and all the notice and adulation which Uraca was now receiving. Anna had for long been known as the champion amongst the ladies, and, quite apart from the possession of the bracelet, she would have delighted in the glory of an exciting contest and well-won victory. Anna was a woman of strong will,

with plenty of natural capacity, but she had allowed her faculties to rust in the enervating atmosphere of a comfortable home, where idleness was the order of the day; and now she had no higher ambition at heart than to excel in tennis matches, or be spoken of as the best rider in the hunting-field, or the most fleet and daring follower of the otter hounds amongst all the ladies who ever took part in that exciting but not over feminine sport.

And to-day Anna was destined to hear some words spoken about herself which inflicted a severe wound to her pride and self-satisfaction, and the sting of which remained with her for long, and had a material influence over her conduct during the following weeks.

The company gathered together at Lord Egan's to-day was a very large and a rather mixed one. There had been tents put up for the refreshments, and after the prize-giving, of which Uraca and Ratcliff had been the joint heroes, the main body of the guests flocked thither to obtain tea or coffee, or more solid refreshment, and the tent became

quickly crowded to the utmost extent of its capacity.

Anna had obtained a seat in a dark corner, and had been supplied with something to eat and drink; but other people had come flocking in, and she was soon hemmed in and separated from her partner, whilst not knowing anything much about the persons who were her immediate neighbours. Many of these seemed to belong to one party, and they were talking together with perhaps rather too much freedom, considering the character of the place they were in, and the number of persons round and about them. But in the general hubbub nobody appeared likely to have time and attention to spare to heed what others said, and Anna, in the deep shadow of her secluded corner, passed altogether unnoticed. Even had anybody seen that the nook was occupied, it would have been hard to have distinguished the features of the person seated there.

"It was as pretty a bit of play as I have ever seen. Who was the girl who won it after all?"

"Oh, the youngest of the Underwood girls—

I don't know her name. It was her sister who was playing against her in the final tie."

"What! that lovely young creature in white and gold? I should never have guessed them to be sisters. There is no sort of a likeness that I saw."

"No; the little one has twice the character in her face that the beauty has. I suppose she is not pretty, but really she may do better for herself than her sisters. There must be something queer about those Underwood girls. They have much more than the average good looks, but they go on year after year, year after year, and not one of them gets married, or even engaged. They have fellows dangling after them sometimes for a few weeks at a time, and one begins to hope that something is going at last to happen; but it never does, and there they are, all growing up a houseful of old maids together, and it must be a great annoyance to their parents, one would think."

"Oh, come, you can't speak of that lovely young thing we saw to-day as an 'old maid.' Why, she did not look more than twenty, and she has a sister, I am told, as pretty as herself.

Don't be hard on the poor girls. In these outlandish places marriageable men do not grow on every bush."

"No—that's true enough. They are at a disadvantage in that way certainly; but it doesn't seem to me to account for everything. As for their ages, Edna must be two or three-and-twenty, and she has been out for four or five seasons, and is always to be seen at any local gaiety, summer or winter. I fancy she must be something of a doll—just a pretty face, and nothing behind. In these days men are just a little afraid of portionless girls with expensive tastes and no brains. In a London season she might have a chance, but down here it seems as though none of them would ever go off."

Anna certainly ought to have made a move to escape from being an involuntary listener to such a conversation; but a sense of the awkwardness there would be were she to be recognised, mingled with a rather mean desire to hear what was said of them behind their backs, kept her riveted to her seat. She turned her head still further from the light, and pulled down her veil, but she made no move to go.

She had often said rather sharp things to her sisters herself about their insipid doll-like beauty, which nobody cared about for more than a few weeks at a time ; she did not entirely dislike to hear her own sharp speeches echoed by another, and so far nothing had been said personally galling. But the old saying about listeners has in it a solid substratum of truth, and Anna was quickly to find that the office of eavesdropper is one that is anything but agreeable.

" There is another daughter too, is there not ? " asked the stranger to Staunton, " I am almost sure that somebody spoke of that tall dark girl who seemed likely at first to win the tournament as Miss Underwood. She must be an elder sister surely."

" Oh yes, that's Anna, the eldest daughter, a semi-masculine young woman, who is anything but good style according to my way of thinking. I suppose her mother cannot keep her in check, for Mrs Underwood is herself a very refined and attractive woman ; but this daughter has some money of her own, I believe, and any amount of confidence, not to say swagger, and goes on in the most independent way. I don't say there is any harm in her exactly ; but for my own part

I have a great aversion to a sporty or horsey woman, and to see that girl in the hunting-field really gives me a turn sometimes. And she does things, too, that I would never hear of permitting my girls to dream of, and altogether I don't entirely approve of her. She makes a great mistake, too, on her own account—that is, if she has the least desire to get married, for of all things that men abhor it is a *manny* woman. One of my sons admired her rather once; but he very soon had enough of her. He came home once in huge disgust, saying that he had heard her ask a fellow at the meet 'if he were game to take such and such a fence.' That was enough for my boy. 'A woman who can talk about being "game" for anything would never do for me, mother,' he said. 'If there is a thing I abominate in a girl's mouth, it is that kind of low slang that they hear from men who appear to be privileged to say and do what they please.' I confess I quite agreed with my son. I dislike above all things such loose and vulgar kind of talk,"

"Yes, it is a great pity our girls are ever allowed to get into those ways—what would our mothers have said to it? I suppose the fault is

partly ours for being too lax in discipline. We allow things to our children which would never have been accorded to us, and then we wonder why the modern girls are so different from their predecessors. But the fault is not all theirs."

"Possibly not; but it is a great misfortune for poor Mrs Underwood that none of her daughters make suitable marriages. Anna, I suppose, she has given up by this time. Why, unless the girl came out very early, she cannot be far off thirty by now, and she is losing her good looks, and getting a confirmed masculine bearing which is hopeless to matrimony. But I should be glad to hear that either of the pretty sisters was engaged. And if there is a fourth coming on behind, why, really something should be done. A woman with four unmarried daughters in her wake is what the givers of indoor entertainments are apt to call a 'caution'; and though this dark-haired youngest can be kept back possibly a little longer, it is plain that she has passed the Rubicon, and ought not to be hidden away."

"Very likely the eldest sister will retire rather more to let her come forward," said the other lady, who appeared more kindly in dis-

position than her companion. "If she has money, and is averse to matrimony, she might be glad to efface herself for the little sister."

"What? Anna efface herself—Anna retire in favour of a little sister!—I think I see her doing it. Not she, my dear; neither, if report speaks truth, is Miss Underwood by any means averse to matrimony; the difficulty appears to be in finding any man ready and willing to play the part of *le mari de madame*, which Anna's husband would most certainly be required to do, for she has governed her mother all these years, and will not easily yield up the first place in any establishment of which she is a member. She would want a husband who would be a slave, and she makes this so obvious that the chances are she will never get one at all. Well, have you finished? For it is fearfully hot in here. I think we might be going to make room for others."

The speakers rose and edged their way out of the packed tent, and Anna was left alone with her own thoughts for company.

How the girl fumed with anger and hatred as she still sat in her corner, half afraid to emerge into the sunshine without lest her face

should betray her! She had certainly been punished well for her desire to hear what was said about herself and her sisters. Was that the way people talked of her behind her back? Was she called a masculine woman, who hardly knew how to speak becomingly—a woman of thirty, too — one leaving her youth behind already? Oh, it was intolerable! Anna was not yet seven-and-twenty, and believed that she looked younger than her years, though in this she was mistaken; and to be spoken of as an old maid—as one who ought to retire to make room for a younger sister—to make room for Uraca of all people! Why, the thing was intolerable—perfectly unbearable. If that was what people were saying of her, she would soon show them their mistake. She had been thinking for some time that she had had almost enough of home life, and would like an establishment of her own at last. It had never seriously occurred to her before that, with her money and her good looks, she could ever have the smallest difficulty in marrying if once she made up her mind to do it; but the talk she had overheard just now put a somewhat new face on the matter.

Did that spiteful old Mrs Lethbridge know

what she was saying? It was perfectly true that she had once ranked Algy Lethbridge amongst her admirers, and that he had gradually discontinued his attentions without her knowing why. The same thing had happened with other men, but she had never troubled her head to think what it might mean. She had the cheerful confidence that often accompanies a large vitality, and she was not prone to look for faults in herself. She had been well aware that some people had called her "fast," and on the whole she had not objected; she fancied that it gave her something of an increased standing and attention. She had never before regarded it in the light of a possible stumbling-block in her path; but she had heard this same characteristic now alleged as a very sufficient reason why she would never find a husband.

"But they shall see — they shall see," whispered Anna to herself, as she drew on her gloves and prepared to sally forth. She felt that she had by this time gained command over her face, and there was now rising within her something of a fierce desire to go forth on a career of victory, and to show the world that she was not going to drift quietly into the back-

water of life, as though her part in its drama were now over.

She thought of the idea which had come to her of late with regard to Lieutenant Mannesty's tutor. To-day that individual had gone up many degrees in her favour. A man who could play tennis like that must surely excel in other manly exercises. He might not have money; but she had a comfortable fortune, whilst he made something by his wits, and she would not be averse to holding the purse-strings herself. She did like mastery, whether she were prepared to admit it or not.

"I really might do worse," she mused. "He has a good deal in his favour. He is very, very quiet, he would be easily managed, easily led. He can't have much will of his own with that insignificant face and figure, and if I set my mind to the task, I am sure I could catch him. Nobody can like the life of being bear-leader to one young cub of a pupil after another; and I could enable him to settle down to a more congenial life wherever we decided to do it. Other fellows might suit me better in one way, but one cannot get at them, and I don't know of one just now that I should care

to take in hand. Mr Ratcliff and his pupil are fixtures, and we see them pretty nearly every day. Papa likes him, and papa will let me please myself, as he has always said, because I can afford to pick and choose, and the rest can't. I suppose if we were to go to London we could do better; but it would be no good going now till next year, and papa always says he can't afford it. Besides, I don't want to go on till next year, not if people are talking like this about me. I'll get it settled pretty quick, and be married and away before the next London season begins. After all, I daresay I shall like him well enough when we are once married. I suppose one is always more or less bored by one's husband. He will do as well as any other, and be more amenable than some. I wish I had played the tennis-match with him. It isn't good for Uraca to be brought into notice so much at her age. I can see that now. I wish I hadn't come out quite so young. It seems to make people think me so absurdly old now. Yes, there she goes with Mr Ratcliff—really the child must be spoken to. I thought I had given her a hint before about her silly attempt at flirtation—she will

make herself the laughing-stock of the place! I will go and send her to mamma. I am sure it is time she was seen with somebody else. And I will make up my mind to it at once and for all—I will have Mr Ratcliff for my husband, and he shall propose to me within a month!"

CHAPTER VI.

THE SQUIRE'S BANE.

"I DECLARE it is too bad! It is the most provoking thing I ever knew, and for the life of me I don't see how to put a stop to it."

It was Mr Underwood who spoke—"the squire," as he was often called, although by rights the title did not belong to him, as he was only the tenant of the property, and not the owner. But he had been there so long, and he was practically the landlord to so many of the cottages upon the property he held, that the fact of his being only a tenant himself often escaped the memories of those about him, and it must be confessed that he rather liked being accorded this title, and certainly looked every inch the country squire.

"What is the matter, sir?" asked Mannesty, as he heard this impatient plaint.

"Why, that woodman (as he is called) Binton, that Mr Anstey pleases to keep upon

the place to look after his interests here—it is the most scandalous thing! The fellow is the most notorious poacher in the place,—everybody knows that,—and here he is, with the right to range my woods,—practically free to shoot my birds and snare my hares,—and I am powerless to do anything, because, however much I may complain to Mr Anstey, he always says that until I can prove my case, he sees no reason for getting rid of a valuable and trustworthy servant."

"You mean that this man is the owner's servant, but that he has the right to be at large all over your property?"

"He is free of the woods behind those fields," answered the squire. "When I took over the lease, years ago, I was glad enough of the arrangement. I wanted the shooting, but I did not want to be bothered with looking after all the fencing, and it seemed a fair and reasonable thing enough for a man to be kept by the owner to do that sort of work, and see about the needful felling of the timber from year to year, and all those many little matters that are the owner's business, and not the tenant's. Old Anstey was a friend of mine.

He put in a very decent chap, and the thing worked as smoothly as possible. Well, a few years ago, my lease ran out, and was renewed upon exactly the same terms as before. Only I now hold from young Anstey, the son (the father is dead), and I have no personal knowledge of him, and he seems to be a prickly customer to deal with. Two years ago, the old woodman died, and this fellow, Binton, was put in. I knew nothing about the man when he came, and was willing enough to let him have the lodge at the far end of the wood where his predecessor had lived, and to come and go about the place as the other man had done. He was a quiet, civil-spoken chap in the first instance, and though my youngest daughter Uraca (who is a shrewd little woman at reading faces) told me, the very first time she set eyes on him, that he had a bad face and a shifty eye, I only laughed at her and made light of it. But she has proved the wise prophet in the end."

"The fellow turned poacher, did he?"

"Turned? I should think he had been a poacher all his life from the artfulness he shows. Why, the whole of last season I and

my people were trying to catch him in the act, and we never succeeded, though we knew he was out almost every night—and a fine havoc he made in the preserves! Of course he is in league with all the worst characters in the place, and can dispose of the game through them without appearing in the matter at all. He knows every foot of the woods, and can dodge my men with the greatest ease. We can never catch him gun in hand, he slips it away within a tree or in some hiding-place under the leaves; and though he has been seen with snares in his hand, he professes they are for vermin, and one can say nothing. He is the deepest and most artful customer one can imagine, and quite one-third of the shooting which I am paying for is lost to me by the poaching propensities of that man. I preserve at considerable cost, and with the greatest of pains, and he shoots down my birds by the score! Could you imagine anything more thoroughly annoying and irritating? It is all I can do sometimes to keep my hands off the rascal."

"I should never rest till I had caught him," cried Mannesty, who entered keenly into the

grievance, as any country-bred man would do. "You think young Anstey would remove him if you could bring forward a proof of his guilt?"

"He says he would. His line of argument is, on the face of it, fair enough. He says that it appears to him that we accuse Binton of what is really the work of poachers about the place, and that it would be very unfair to the man to dismiss him upon insufficient evidence; he might at that rate never get settled with a woodman at all. If any charge of poaching could be proved against the fellow, he says that would be sufficient, and he should be sent away; but he plainly thinks we are on a wrong scent, and that his man is the victim of prejudice. He professes that if he is really as notorious a poacher as we profess, it must be easy to prove it, and that sounds reasonable enough; but the fellow is such an uncommonly slippery customer that it puzzles me how he is to be caught. His having the right to be in the wood by day and night gives him such a pull. He professes to be a sworn enemy to poachers, and when we have found him crouching in the wood at nights, he has declared that he is on the watch for them, and

means to give them a warm welcome when they come."

"Thoroughly tiresome," assented Mannesty, shaking his head. "It 's as awkward a case as ever I heard of. But really it seems as if something might be done. September has come, and I suppose he will be at his old tricks again?"

"He has begun them already, that is what put the thing in my head afresh. My keeper came just now to tell me that he is sure Binton has had the best part of an uncommonly fine covey of birds brought up in the field just bordering the wood. They were always about there till the night before the first, and on the morning of that day more than half were gone. He is convinced that Binton had them. He saw him skulking in the wood before daylight, and some shots were fired; but he could not get to the place in time. No one ever can when that chap is the criminal. I declare it is enough to provoke a saint!"

Mannesty was looking at Ratcliff.

"I should like to track the fellow down," he said meditatively. "I say, Rat, do you think it might be done?"

"I should think it might," answered the other quietly. "If Mr Underwood would give us leave to try?"

"Give you leave? I should be only too thankful if you would do anything at all in the matter; for it is puzzling me more than a little, I can tell you, and is an annoyance that I don't know how to stand. Why, listen here," cried the squire, warming with his grievance, "and tell me if you ever knew anything more provoking in your life! This very spring I had a splendid cock pheasant and two hen birds that I kept in a special pheasantry apart, hoping to rear some extra fine young ones from them. Of course Binton knew all about this. He comes backwards and forwards to the house with errands and what not. He knows perfectly well what we think of him, and he hates us as much as we hate him, especially since I gave him notice to quit the lodge in the wood, and put my own keeper's son there. But there is no ostensible quarrel, and he professes to be very vigilant in our interests, and to be always on the alert if poachers are about, so as to give notice to my people. Well, one Sunday night

when most of the household were at church, and it was just getting dusk, the dog, who is chained up not far from the pheasantry, gave tongue, and barked fiercely and persistently; and the coachman, who chanced to hear him, went out and searched all round the place, and found nothing, though the dog continued to bark and tug at his chain. It was a thousand pities the man did not loose him, to show him where the intruder was. For can you guess what Binton was after, and where he was hiding all that time?"

"In the pheasant-house itself, perhaps?" suggested Ratcliff; and the squire nodded his head.

"That is exactly what we have every reason to believe, for he was certainly nowhere else upon the place. The coachman never thought of going in, but contented himself with patrolling round the outbuildings, keeping a sharp look-out all round, and he saw and heard nothing. But after he had gone back, and it had got dark, the dog barked once again in the same angry fashion, and in the morning the pheasants were gone. The inference is plain; though, of course, we cannot even

profess that anything is proved by such a story."

"No; but it would have been rather too daring a thing for a common poacher to have attempted. I suppose he sold the birds?"

"Probably, and made a very good thing out of it. I could multiply instances of that fellow's craft and thefts, none of which we have been able to prove, though we are convinced that he, and he only, can be the author of them. There was one nest of partridge eggs my man found in the field once, and as he was taking them, Binton came that way, and walked up with him to the house, professing to have some errand there. He couldn't get rid of the fellow, do what he would, and as he could not risk the eggs getting cold, he put them at once under a hen, Binton standing chatting to him all the while. So far as my man knows, nobody else upon the place knew of those eggs; but in time they vanished too. No doubt some neighbour of ours had them taken up to him, and has brought up the brood. I did try to trace them, and found that a sitting of partridge eggs had been sold to a neighbour of mine the very day

we missed them, but it had been done through a third person, and Binton could not be tackled about it. Really, the irritation and annoyance that man causes are enough to worry me into my grave!"

"Well, I think the best thing we can do is to catch him for you," said Mannesty, with a sidelong glance at Ratcliff. "I should quite enjoy the sport if we had your sanction. Could you let us have a real good view of the man, that we might know him for certain if we were to see him again?"

"No difficulty about that at all," answered the squire briskly. "If you will walk with me as far as the wood, I have no doubt we shall come across him somewhere. He is always about up there, with his eye on this place, to see who comes and goes. He can pretty well command it from different spots, and he knows as well as possible if anybody is likely to disturb him at his little games. The young fellow at the lodge is his chief enemy; but, unfortunately, I cannot afford to engage him as a keeper, and he is at work on his own account most of the day. Sometimes he goes out at night to have a parol round, but he

has never caught the rascal red-handed, though he has found snares and gins which he is certain are of his setting."

"Well," said Ratcliff quietly, "I should like first to see this fellow himself, and then to see the young man who knows something of his snares. What would constitute a proof in law against him? Would it be sufficient to find him taking game out of snares, or having game in his hands?"

"One would think it ought," answered the squire hotly. "But there are so many quibbles with a man in his position. It would convict an ordinary fellow fast enough; but this man might plead that he had found the trapped game in some poacher's snare, and that he was bringing it down to the house here—which it would, under those circumstances, be his duty to do. If, however, he were to be caught carrying it off in another direction, then I should think nobody could doubt his guilt. I am sure any magistrate in these parts would convict him, and then Mr Anstey could not very well decline to believe our complaints."

Ratcliff nodded. For the moment he seemed to have taken the lead.

"I think I see," he answered. "Well, if you will be kind enough to show us the two men, I think I will undertake that if this fellow is so notorious a poacher, we shall be able to prove it in the course of another two or three weeks."

The squire smiled slightly, but he looked pleased all the same.

"I hope you may be right, Mr Ratcliff. I should be more sanguine if the fellow had not baffled us so many times before; but you may be sharper than our country folks."

An odd gleam passed across Mannesty's face as he gave a sidelong look at Ratcliff; but the latter did not return the glance, and they all walked up to the wood together.

As the squire had said, it was no difficult matter to obtain sight of the man Binton, who was busily engaged in examining the young saplings, and marking those he thought should be taken away. He touched his hat civilly enough as the gentlemen came up, and consulted the squire about some of the larger timber to be dealt with, in a most respectful fashion. Mannesty stood by the squire's side, and joined in the talk. Ratcliff was slightly

more in the background, and his eyes never left the face of the woodman.

"I know the fellow," he said to Mannesty afterwards. "Once he lived down in our part of the world, and a more thoroughgoing blackguard I do not know. Poacher? I should think he was a poacher! He made our place too hot to hold him, and it's years since he's been down there. He's a 'cute customer—a real Artful Dodger—if ever there was one. I confess I should enjoy catching him at his old tricks. It will certainly give zest to the chase. It will be an odd thing if we cannot compass it amongst us."

"I suspect we shall, if you give your mind to it," said Mannesty, laughing. "The squire doesn't much believe in us; but he doesn't know the sort of chap you are, nor the experiences of tracking you have had out West. I don't think you often put your hand to a thing like this and fail. I shall be surprised if we don't have our hands on the fellow before long."

"So shall I," answered Ratcliff quietly.

"And then," said Mannesty, laughing, "you will be welcome to claim your reward. I

suspect the old fellow would be ready to give you pretty nearly anything you asked for, even to the half of his kingdom, in the good old-fashioned style. Certainly I do not think he will deny you one of his daughters, and it seems to me that Miss Underwood is regarding you with eyes of considerable favour, your poverty notwithstanding. Is not that to be the test?—a woman who will care for you yourself, without the bait of your great wealth?"

"I believe I said so once," answered Ratcliff.

"And have you gone back from your position?"

"No," he answered, speaking slowly, "I have not gone back. I want all that, but I want something more too."

"And what may that be?"

"I want her to love me for my own sake."

"Well, surely if she is willing to marry you as a poor man, it must be from motives of love."

"Perhaps; I am not quite so sure of that. And then, again, I want to love her with my whole heart too."

"Did you not wish that before?'

"I hardly know. Looking back to the day

we first spoke of this, I think that I doubted my own capacity for that sort of love. I have an impression that I thought if I found a good and well-born woman who would be willing to accept me for my own worth without any golden bait, I should be willing to please my parents by presenting her to them as a daughter. But latterly — the thing coming closer, perhaps—I find that I want more. I want to love her myself, and to feel certain of her love for me."

"Well, of course, that complicates matters a little," said Mannesty, with a smile. "One knows that true love is very pleasant and sweet to the taste; but it's an open question how it wears,—to judge by the outlook of one's married friends,—and it seemed as if you were going to content yourself with something less. However, Miss Underwood is good-looking enough in a rather flashy style, and perhaps you will learn to feel a romantic attachment for her in time—though, I confess, I can't quite fancy any fellow's being spoony upon her."

A shadowy smile hovered round the corners of Ratcliff's lips, but all he said was—

"Miss Underwood has undoubtedly some very attractive and taking qualities, and she does me the honour to be very friendly towards me. That being the case it would not become me to join in any criticism of her weak points, from which none of us are free."

"To be sure not; and she's a fine woman, and might be an excellent manager of a large house. You might do worse, old fellow; and your parents would welcome a less attractive woman for the pleasure of seeing you married."

"Yes, I believe they would," answered Ratcliff, with the same faint, indefinite smile. "But my mother is a great lover of beauty; I should like my wife to please her fastidious taste."

There was some excitement in the Underwood household when it became known that Lieutenant Mannesty and Mr Ratcliff were going to undertake the capture of the poacher, and were apparently tolerably confident of success. The girls were filled with lively admiration and curiosity, whilst the boys shrugged their shoulders and laughed.

"Catch a weasel asleep!" said Tom, who had had many long watches and fruitless hunts after the offender, and had now pretty well given

up all hope of capture. Gerald and Ted would have liked to have a share in the new undertaking, but their assistance was declined. Mannesty said that the fewer there were concerned, the more chance there was of success. He appeared to think that Ratcliff was the most versed in such things, which surprised the others not a little. What knowledge of poachers and their ways could an Oxford coach possibly have? But they could not exactly ask this question ; and Uraca suggested that perhaps he had known better days once, and had had a home of his own, where he had had similar experiences. She was laughed at by her sisters, and Anna told her rather sharply not to talk and think so much about Mr Ratcliff. Uraca did not think she merited this rebuke, for she had hardly seen anything of him for many days past,—not, in fact, since the tennis tournament nearly a fortnight ago,—and she certainly hardly ever mentioned his name, though she knew that she thought about him a good deal. In fact, she was sufficiently aware of this to be sensitive on the subject, and quickly retired into her shell on receiving this sisterly snub.

Days, however, went by one after the other, and nothing more was heard of the poacher or his affairs. The young men came and went about the house as before. Mannesty went out frequently with shooting parties from that and other places. Ratcliff did the same occasionally, and it was always remarked that he shot very well when he did go, and though he did not fire as often as many of the other men, he always brought down his bird when he did, and generally appeared to aim for those at the longest distance.

But the attempt to capture Binton was not alluded to by them after the first few days following upon the squire's broaching of his grievance; and some amongst the party thought it had been little but an idle boast on their part, until a day came when they were to be undeceived. It was a bright but chilly evening. Outside, the moon was shining brightly, but within doors curtains were drawn, and the party was gathered round the fire talking and laughing, and enjoying the cosy appearance of the room, which the first fire of the season always seems to bring. Gerald had once or twice declared that he thought he

heard shots from the direction of the wood, and opined that poachers must be about; but when they listened, all was silent, and they decided that he must be mistaken.

All of a sudden the door opened and the butler ushered in Mannesty, who looked hot, dishevelled, and excited, and had plainly only come on an errand of emergency, as he wore his rough suit of tweed, and his shooting boots and gaiters, which were well bespattered with mud.

"A thousand pardons, ladies, for this intrusion," he said, "but I believe we have got the fellow in a trap, and I want some of you to come to help me in the final capture. He has been shooting all over the wood in the most brazen way,—you know it is the Free Foresters' *fête* in the village, and he knew all your people would be there to-night. We have been following him and tracking him the whole time, but did not try to close, knowing that in the dark he might elude us, as he knows the wood so much better than we do. He would throw down the game, and we might only take him empty-handed, and that would be a pity. So we let him fill his bag, and he has had the consummate insolence to take the path down

towards this house to escape by. Ratcliff is on the trail, and Binton will be a sharper fellow than I take him for if he dodges him, and I have made a circuit to give warning here, that we may have a force sufficient to close all exits and get him fast in the trap. There are a dozen ways or more by which he could effect an escape if he once suspected he was followed; but if all these are closed, then I think we have him fast."

In great excitement, the squire and his sons donned their overcoats, and, with stout sticks in their hands, sallied forth. They had not time to hear more details. They knew they had but heard the most meagre outline of the tale so far, --for Binton would not have been tracked like that by ordinary means,—but every moment was of value, and must not be lost.

Suddenly, and as it seemed, close to the house, came the double report of a gun, followed by a loud cry.

"Come on!" cried Mannesty, in great excitement. "Heaven grant that he has not shot down Ratcliff! I never thought of that. This way. Come quickly! That shot meant mischief, I am certain."

CHAPTER VII.

THE HERO OF THE NIGHT.

THE squire and his sons, together with Mannesty, rushed out into the clear brightness of the September night, whilst the ladies were left behind in all the excitement of fear, uncertainty, and suspense.

Mrs. Underwood, who had a feminine horror of firearms that all her husband's raillery had not conquered, sank back in her seat, pale and trembling, murmuring that she always knew—she had always said from the very first—that that horrid man would be the death of somebody before they had done with him.

"I wish your father would not always insist on going into the thick of everything," she moaned plaintively. "That terrible Binton hates him with a deadly hatred for finding him out. No doubt he has a revolver with six or seven charges. He would as soon murder your father and brothers as look at them, if

once he thought he was going to be caught. Oh dear! oh dear! I do wish they would all have come indoors and shut the door, then"—

"And left Mr Ratcliff to be shot down by the poacher, all alone and unaided?" cried Uraca, who was very pale, though her eyes were shining brilliantly. "Oh, mother, mother! you do not mean that?"

"Well, I only wish that everybody would stay quietly at home, and not go running into needless danger," cried the poor lady, with tears in her eyes. "What does it matter if a few birds are shot? I'm sure we have always game enough for the table, and some to send away to friends, and what can anybody want more than that? If young men would not be so foolhardy, other people would not have to run into danger on their behalf. If your father or your brothers get hurt, I shall find it very hard to forgive Mr Ratcliff. What does he mean by prowling round after men on our place? I call it very interfering of him, and if any harm comes of it I will tell him so."

"No, mother, indeed you won't," said Anna, in her commanding tones. "Mr Ratcliff has evidently been cleverer than all our people put

together, and what he has done has been at father's special request—at least, with his full approbation. It is most kind of him to interest himself at all in the matter, and if he does succeed in capturing that wretched Binton red-handed in the act of extensive poaching, he will have done a benefit to the whole community. It seems to me that you have all of you misunderstood Mr Ratcliff all this time, and that he is really a very courageous, clever, and thoroughly manly man. I have said so for some time, you will admit. Now the rest of you are coming round to my opinion."

Uraca's eyes were bright, and she gave a quick responsive glance at her sister. It seemed to her as though she had never seen Anna appear to such advantage as she did now, standing forth as the champion of the tutor.

But the suspense of not knowing what was happening out of doors, and what was the meaning of those two shots and that shout—in which she had recognised, or thought she had recognised, Ratcliff's voice—was becoming too great for endurance. She slipped silently from the room, and began throwing across

her shoulders a light wrap, preparatory to sallying out in search of news.

"What are you doing, Uraca?"

The question was addressed to her by Anna, and Anna was speaking in a very sharp voice. Uraca turned round to answer.

"I want to know what has happened. I want to go out and get some news for mother. I want to know if Mr Ratcliff has been hurt."

Anna studied her sister's face attentively for a moment.

"Why, child, you are as white as a ghost! I did not know that you were gun-shy, like poor mamma."

"I don't think I am," answered Uraca; "but you know what Mr Mannesty said—he was afraid something had happened. Anna I must find out. I"—

"Uraca, you will do nothing of the kind," said Anna, with quick decision. "It is no place for you, whatever is going on out there. If you were a little older and a little wiser, you would know better than to betray such a very tender interest in a man who has probably never wasted two thoughts upon

you. You must really learn a little more care for appearances."

Uraca's face was as red now as it had been pale before. She flung the wrap from her shoulders, and stood facing her sister with angry eyes. The girl's temper was very quick, though she had learnt in the main to keep it under control.

"Anna, you do say the most detestable things! I cannot think how they come into your head! I don't want to be rude or disagreeable, and I know that you are older than I, and have some kind of right to speak, but I advise you not to provoke me too far. There are some things I will not hear even from you!"

Anna's eyebrows went up. She realised, for the first time in her life, that Uraca had a strong individuality of her own, and that this might be a source of some trouble. The two other sisters contented themselves with their undoubted good looks, and never troubled to assert themselves, or cared to develop in any unexpected direction. Anna had always held her position of ascendency over them; was it likely that she was going to be baffled

by a chit of a girl only just out of the school-room? She did not think it likely, and answered her own question by a smile.

But really it was strange how good-looking Uraca appeared when her "monkey was up," as Teddy would have put it. Anna did not think she altogether liked the change which came over the girl, bringing the damask bloom to her cheek, the glow of vivid feeling into her eyes, and lighting up the mobile, irregular features with something like positive radiance. It was not the time to take serious note of these points, but Anna received a very distinct and unpleasant reminder at that moment that she might chance to have a rival in this youngest sister, far more dangerous to herself than either of her other sisters had ever proved with their regular, doll-like beauty.

"Hush!" she said quickly—though Uraca was no longer speaking. "I think they are coming back. I hear steps and voices."

Uraca turned her head and listened intently. The sisters were standing together in the entrance-hall, which was brightly lighted. It was quite true; the party who had gone forth

were now approaching the house again, and they appeared to be in eager talk about something,—the loud tones of their voices implying some anger, perhaps, but none of the awe that would have been expressed had some tragedy been recently enacted.

Anna stepped out to meet the party, her face kindling with animation; whilst Uraca, mindful of the rebuff she had just received, shrank back a little against the wall, the colour ebbing away from her face as her anxiety re-asserted itself in spite of her better judgment.

Yes, here they came—at least some of them. There was Mr Mannesty and her father, and Teddy and Mr Ratcliff. He came last of all, and walked slowly. He held one arm with the other, and in a moment Uraca knew that he had received some kind of injury, and her face grew white with apprehension. Nobody seemed aware of this at the moment; but, as they all stood together in the lighted hall, and the squire sang cheerily out that all was right, and they had the poacher safe at last, Mannesty turned round upon his friend, and exclaimed—

"Why, Rat, you are hurt! Why did you not say so before? What is the matter?"

"I fancy the fellow broke my arm; but that's a thing that will soon mend. Pray don't trouble yourselves about it, ladies. I will go to a doctor and get it strapped up. A broken bone is a mere trifle. It was better than getting a charge of shot into my system, which I only barely escaped."

"Go to a doctor, indeed!" cried the squire indignantly. "I like that. Is that your idea of country hospitality? Teddy, you run round to the stables and send off for Mr Hunt. And Uraca, child, just tell the servants to have two bedrooms got ready at once, and make a good fire in Mr Ratcliff's room. You will not stir out again to-night, my good friends. We do not send bones broken in our service to be mended at wayside inns."

"Really, sir, you are most kind, but"—

"No buts—no buts!" cried the squire imperiously. "That matter is settled once and for all. Now come in, and tell us the whole story, for I'm a Dutchman if I understand how it was all managed! To think of the dances that fellow has led us, and that you should be

able to nab him like this within a week of being put up to his dodges! I can't think now how you did it."

Mannesty laughed as the party moved on into the drawing-room. Anna had come forward, and had adjusted a sling to support Ratcliff's injured arm, and he could rest it comfortably whilst they talked. He was not in much pain, and made light of the whole matter, and it was Mannesty who, as usual, did most of the talking. Uraca, her errand accomplished, slipped quietly back into the room, her face still pale with apprehension and anxiety. Ratcliff lifted his eyes as she appeared, and gave her one keen glance. Her face suddenly crimsoned, and she looked away. He next turned his glance towards Anna, whose face was glowing with animation and pleasure. She looked very handsome, and very well pleased with the turn matters were taking. It was a very good thing, she thought, that Ratcliff had received an injury sufficient to keep him a prisoner in their house for a few days or a week. That would give her just the opportunity she desired. She did not mind in the least if he were a little ill. It might even be

better if he were. She might find him more approachable and easy to deal with. For there were times when Anna felt that she was not making the progress she desired. This man had an uncomfortable knack of twisting her speeches round somehow, and making them sound trivial and sometimes flippantly foolish. She had not succeeded in producing the impression she was striving after; but if she had him in the same house for a time, she felt sure that success would crown her efforts.

Ratcliff looked from one sister to the other with that curiously penetrating glance of his, but what his thoughts were nobody could divine. Indeed, for the moment nobody was specially noticing him; he was the hero of the night, to be sure, but public attention was riveted upon Mannesty, who was telling the tale.

"It is Ratcliff who deserves the credit of the capture. My part is a very humble one. I have got the same blundering sort of way of doing things that your own people appear to have. I should have betrayed my proximity to the fellow a hundred times if I had been on his trail. But Ratcliff here, he understands that sort of thing. He is a great traveller, you

must know, and has been in all sorts of outlandish places in the world. Once he lived, actually lived, amongst a wild tribe of Indians —the sort of fellows who generally scalp any white man they meet—for several months, and learned from them more about tracking and stalking than the average European picks up in a lifetime. He's done no end of things of that sort in his lifetime—travelling about with other fellows, you know," added Mannesty suddenly, feeling that perhaps he was letting out too much of his friend's past career, and giving him a character for exploits not usual to humble tutors; but at the moment nobody had the wits to think of that, their attention was all given to the tale, —" and in that way he picked up no end of experiences. Well, when he heard of this fellow's ways of going on, he didn't think he should have much trouble in stalking him; and he has been out almost every night since, following in his tracks, and seeing all he does. He wouldn't take me with him. He said I should spoil it all; and I verily believe I should, for I can't hide myself behind a molehill so as to leave nothing of me visible, as Ratcliff can, or work myself snake-fashion along the ground so

that nobody can see that there's anything there. So he went out alone night after night, and got to know everything the fellow did. Then when he felt pretty certain of the prey, I was allowed to come too, and we arranged a code of signals between us which we should understand. Ratcliff has observed that the man generally makes his way finally out through some of your gates; and it was arranged that if he hooted like an owl at any time, I was to make straight for the house to give the alarm, and get the gates and doors closed, whilst he still kept on the poacher's trail, and, if need be, sprang upon him, and held him fast till help came. It was hearing his signal that sent me scudding to the house just now: but I suppose I was not quite cautious enough, and that the fellow heard something; for, as we saw, he and Ratcliff were struggling together before we came, and it seems that the brute had broken his arm before we got there. He must tell what happened after he signalled to me."

"Very much, I fancy, what Mannesty said," answered Ratcliff, upon whom all eyes were now turned. "I think he either heard footsteps, or saw Mannesty gliding up to the house; for

he stopped short in a suspicious way, and began trying back, as if afraid to go on. I did not wish him to get free of the house precincts then, as I knew if he got into the open it would be more difficult to capture him, and with that sack of game on his back it would have been a thousand pities to have let him loose. So when he passed me, as I stood in the deep shadow of the angle of the wall, I sprang out on him and held him fast, singing out for Mannesty to come, just at the moment that he let off his gun—hoping, I suppose, either to injure me, or to frighten me into letting go my hold."

"Frighten you!" breathed Mannesty softly. "That 's a good 'un, if he only knew it."

"How in the world did you manage to hold him even for a few minutes?" asked the squire, with a genuine look of astonishment upon his bronzed face, as he turned his gaze upon the slight frame of the tutor. A shadowy smile was upon Ratcliff's lips as he answered—

"Well, for one thing, I took him by surprise, which gave me the advantage at the outset; and then I am stronger than I look, I believe, and I understand something of the art of capture. When he had discharged his gun,

he brought the stock of it down on my arm and broke it; but I do not think he knew what he had done, and, as help arrived almost immediately, he did not succeed in wrenching himself away. I am very glad the fellow will meet his deserts. He is evidently a slippery and dangerous customer, and it is a great shame that you should be at the mercy, so to speak, of a rogue like that."

"I do not know how to thank you enough for ridding us of him," cried the squire, rubbing his hands in honest glee. "I never passed a day of my life without being annoyed in some fashion by thoughts of Binton, or the story of some fresh misdeed on his part. I owe you a real debt of gratitude for your action to-night, and if there is any way in which I can repay you I should be most glad to do so. I am only exceedingly sorry that you have received an injury whilst acting on my behalf."

"Oh, that is nothing," answered Ratcliff indifferently. "Broken bones never trouble me; I have had experience of them before. As for the service, as you term it, there was a great satisfaction in performing it. I had an old score of my own to settle with Binton, as

he calls himself now. I can tell you that it was the greatest satisfaction to feel my fingers on the throat of the rascal. I only hope he realised to whom he owed his capture. If I have to bear witness against him before the magistrate, he will know."

"Ah, I knew he was an old hand," cried the squire, with something almost like glee. "I knew those tricks of his were not the outcome of a few weeks or months of poaching, begun after he came here and saw his way so plain. I was convinced he had been up to it long before. Ah, what a satisfaction there is in really getting one's hands upon a villain! To think that my woods will be free from Binton's presence from this time forth! Why, I feel years younger already."

The jovial squire laughed, and the others laughed with him; but their faces took another expression soon afterwards, as Tom and Gerald came dashing in. They, together with the coachman, Binton's special enemy, had escorted the poacher to the habitation of the local police force—a simple roadside cottage, as is usual in country places, where the constable has his quarters so long as he serves in the district.

They had got their captive safely to the place, and he was locked up in a room appointed for the purpose, whilst the captors told the story, and the policeman made notes of it.

"We thought we had him as safe as a rat in a trap," cried Tom, who was flushed with excitement and vexation; "for there was only one small window, and that had a bar across it; the door was bolted on the outside; and as for the fellow's escaping, the idea never so much as entered our heads."

"You don't mean that the rogue has escaped?" roared the squire, springing to his feet. "Tom, speak out — you don't mean that you have let him give you the slip?"

"Well, I don't see that it's any doing of mine," answered Tom, shrugging his shoulders, "and I'm more annoyed than I can say; and Childers is pretty well mad, I can tell you. But this is what happened. We were about ten minutes, I suppose, in the outer room telling the tale, and then Childers said he would get into uniform—he was off duty when we found him—and get the fellow taken at once to the police station in the next town, as

he had no real accommodation in his quarters; and we lingered by his fire whilst he dressed, for we thought he might want some help in getting the fellow handcuffed and taken safely off. All the police of the district have their eye on Binton, and have been longing to catch him these past six months or more; but he is such a slippery fellow there is no getting hold of him. Well, we waited, and had a cigar meantime, and there was not a sound from the small room into which Binton had been shoved; but when we opened the door to have him out at last—lo, and behold! he was gone. The window was open; the iron bar had been unscrewed and removed; the fellow had squirmed out through the little window-frame, and we may whistle for him now."

"Ah," said Ratcliff quietly, "he had tools upon him—neat little burglar's tools, I don't doubt. They are pretty little things, and go into wonderfully small compass. They often wear them in little leather pouches under their clothes, so that if their pockets are searched at any time"—

"We did do that," put in Tom, parenthetically. "We took away his knife and a few

odds and ends he had upon him. We fully believed he went in there with nothing but his bare hands to help him to escape. I suppose we were fools, but"—

"One can't think of everything," put in Mannesty good-naturedly, for the squire was dreadfully put out by this escape. "It takes a fellow as well up in burglars' and rogues' ways as Ratcliff to be armed at all points. Besides, I don't see that everything is lost. The fellow will be apprehended sooner or later after what has happened, and at least you will be free from his presence here. He will have to keep in the closest hiding if he ventures to remain within twenty miles of this place; and most likely he will take himself off to pastures new, as he has been forced to do before now, if what Ratcliff says is correct. I don't think you will be troubled with him any more in this part of the world. You will not have him marauding in your woods any longer, I take it, squire."

"I wanted to see the fellow brought to justice," grumbled the squire, only half appeased. "Of course it 's something to have the fellow gone, but I wanted more than that. These country police are really grossly incom-

petent. I shall write to the *Times*. I shall make a complaint. I should like to have every man of them sent about his business. They never can catch a rogue—never! I suppose that is hardly to be expected—they are much too busy seeing to the muzzling of wretched dogs, or some tomfoolery like that. But to let go a notorious rogue when he has actually been safely placed in their hands—really I call it too bad! I'll not let it pass uncensured. I 'll "—

The squire 's threats died away in growling muttering, and his wife and daughters smiled slightly. It was his way to work himself up, and to threaten all sorts of fierce things. They knew very well that the next day he would go down to see the policeman and hear his story, and end up by saying it was no fault of his, and by tipping the children all round, as it was against his principles to give money to the man himself.

The arrival of the doctor was the next interlude to that exciting evening, and Ratcliff went up to the comfortable room assigned to him, and reappeared no more that night. Mr Hunt came down saying that the fracture was a simple one and not severe in character, only

advising that Ratcliff should remain where he was for a few days, as a private house was a better place for a crippled man than even the comfortable village inn where the friends were staying. The squire was always pleased to have a full house, and the daughters were equally glad to keep the two young men as guests. Of course Mannesty would remain as long as his tutor did, and the thing required no particular pressing. Mannesty thanked Mrs Underwood for her kindness, and accepted on behalf of himself and his friend; and Anna went to her room with the pleasant feeling that things were all working very smoothly for the accomplishment of her desires.

CHAPTER VIII.

SISTERLY COUNSEL.

FOR a week Uraca saw nothing at all of Mr Ratcliff.

The young officer was quite one of the family by that time. He went out shooting with the boys, or riding with the girls; he sang songs in the drawing-room, which Uraca accompanied, and kept them all laughing at his brilliant sallies and flow of excellent spirits. But his friend remained upstairs in his own room, for it turned out that he had taken rather a "nasty chill," as the doctor called it, when he was lying in wait for the poacher, and it was thought better, as the weather had turned suddenly much colder, that he should remain for a few days upstairs, and keep as much as possible in one room.

He was not, however, confined to bed, and as Anna had a little sanctum of her own, which she had decorated with taste, and made parti-

cularly comfortable, upon the same floor and close to the room he occupied, this sanctum was placed entirely at his disposal, and the best part of his day was passed there. He received visits from many members of the family, and was not allowed to be at all dull.

Both the Squire and Mrs Underwood came once or twice a day to beguile the tedium of his loneliness. Mannesty was in and out the whole day long, unless bent on sport out of doors: whilst Anna's visits were of necessity tolerably frequent, as she was often obliged to look in for a book or some papers that she wanted, and would more often than not sit down by the fire and have a good long chat before she accomplished her errand. She also made it her work to see after Ratcliff's meals. He was somewhat helpless with one arm in splints, and, as Anna said, "it was manifestly woman's work to look after an invalid." Anna had always arrogated to herself considerable independence of thought and action, and her mother never thought of interfering with her now. So that though Violet and Edna visited Ratcliff together, and Uraca never saw him at all, being consumed just now with an inex-

plicable shyness where the patient was concerned, Anna did more than any of the rest of the family to lighten his solitude, and he began to be looked upon something in the light of her patient.

Uraca in these days was rather restless and uncertain in spirits. She gave herself up as good-humouredly as ever to the whims and caprices of her little playfellows, but she was not always able to concentrate her mind upon their small affairs as she had been heretofore. Probably they were not conscious of this themselves, but she was aware of it, and was afraid to ask the cause. She did not know, either, why some days she was in almost wild spirits, and then, again, unduly dull and depressed. She had never suffered before from these ups and downs, and did not either like or approve them in herself. She knew that she listened with eager ears for every word that was spoken about their guest—knew that the thought of having him in the house was pleasant to her, though it seemed as if she saw less of him than before. She never passed the door of the room in which he was sitting without an odd palpitation of the heart, and if by chance she

heard his voice in passing, she could hardly stop herself from pausing to listen. She knew that every meal-time as it came found her longing to be sent on a message to his room —found her wondering why it was that Anna, who had always made such free use of her for running about the house before, never employed her to go and ask if Mr Ratcliff wished for this or that, but invariably went herself when the servant was not sent. It seemed a little hard to Uraca, who had so many distasteful tasks daily to perform, that she should never be employed upon a congenial errand; but she would have bitten out her tongue sooner than betray herself, and made no sign of the feelings passing within her.

"Why don't you never go and see Mr Ratcliff?" asked Tommy one evening, as he and his small brother and sister came tumbling into the nursery, where Uraca was sitting over a book. "He does tell such jolly tales of wild Indians, and elephants, and tigers, and crocodiles. I believe he has seen everything in the world—everything real. When we ask him if he's seen that place or that animal he always says yes, and tells us a jolly tale about

it. I wish you'd come some day. I think he 'd like it too. He asks about you sometimes, and we tell him how jolly you are, and what you've been doing for us. I think he likes you, Cara. I think he likes us to talk about you. I wish you 'd come and hear some of his tales. I 'm sure you 'd like them. They are real first-raters."

And so it came about that upon the next evening, when the three children went in to "say good-night,"—though it was full half an hour from the bed-time of the youngest, and they had no idea of leaving without hearing some exciting stories,—Uraca went in with them, and made her inquiries after the invalid with a pretty diffidence and interest.

"I am really quite well again, Miss Uraca. To tell the honest truth, I don't think I ever ailed much; but when one has only one arm, one must yield gracefully to the powers that be. I am very glad to see you at last. I have been wondering how I could have offended you, that you showed your displeasure by never coming near me. I hope you will let me do penance for my unconscious sin?"

Uraca's face crimsoned over bewitchingly;

she dared not raise her eyes as she made her little confused apology, not seeing the humorous gleam that shone in Ratcliff's own as he watched every change that passed upon her face with a sense of fascination to which he willingly surrendered himself.

"Oh, please do not think that! Indeed, indeed there is nothing. You have always been so kind. I did not mean to be rude. I did not think you would mind. There were so many others,—I thought you would have enough without me. You know I am not like the rest; I do not know how to talk as they do."

"Thank goodness you don't," was Ratcliff's mental comment, but all he said aloud was, "Well, I am very glad to hear that I have incurred no serious displeasure. And now, won't you sit down? I suppose I shall have to go through my daily drill for the benefit of these exacting youngsters; but you need not listen; there are all the new magazines there on that table."

Uraca took one to cover her confusion, but not a word of it did she read. She listened as breathlessly as the children to stories of sport,

adventure, and peril, and found the quietly-told narrative as absorbing as the most thrilling novel she had ever read. The minutes flew by on wings. She could scarcely believe it when the clock struck, and she had to take the reluctant Edie off to bed.

As she was leaving the room, after a few words from Ratcliff that brought a lovely glow to her cheek and a wonderful light into her dark eyes, she met face to face, just outside the room, her sister Anna, who was going in. Anna cast a keen glance upon the girl's bright face, and Uraca felt as though a sudden cloud had fallen across the sunshine of her sky.

"Have those tiresome children been worrying Mr Ratcliff again?" she asked quickly. "Really, I think they take advantage. Is it you who take them there night by night, Uraca?"

"I have never been before."

"Then why did you go to-night?"

"They asked me to."

"The children—or Mr Ratcliff?"

"The children. You know I have not seen Mr Ratcliff all this time."

Anna stood a moment considering, and then remarked—

"Well, I wish you would stop these silly visits. You know I have never allowed the children in and out of my room, and I don't see why they should take advantage just because Mr Ratcliff is good-natured. Young men always detest children, and you had better see that the thing ceases. It is silly, and I don't like it."

"Then you had better tell Mr Ratcliff so, and ask him not to encourage them," answered Uraca with spirit. "You can give your own orders about your room. I am not the children's mother, or their nurserymaid either."

It was not often that Uraca asserted herself thus, though of late she had occasionally been known to do so when goaded beyond a certain point. Anna looked at her in cold displeasure. She did not like feeling that her power was on the wane over any member of the household.

"You are very rude and bad-tempered to-night, Uraca. You know you are more with the children than anybody else, and can keep them good and amused if you choose. You have more influence over them than the

rest of us ; but, of course, if you are going to take that tone about it, it is useless to say any more."

Anna opened the door and went into the room her sister had just quitted, quite unconscious that every word of this amiable dialogue had been heard within. Uraca went on her way still hurt and angry, but vexed almost more with herself than with Anna, feeling that she had betrayed more temper than was at all right.

That night, after Uraca reached her room, and was standing by the open window, as she loved to do at all seasons of the year, looking out into the starlit night with a sense of longing, of mingled happiness and pain, that she knew not how to analyse, she heard a low tap at her door, and the next moment Anna had come in and had shut the door behind her.

Uraca closed the window quickly, and drew the curtain across it.

" That is right, little one. What a love for fresh air you have ! You have made your room quite cold. But never mind, the fire is hot, and I have come to have a cosy chat before I go to bed. I feel, dear, as though I owe you

something of an apology for the way I spoke to you this afternoon. I did not mean it crossly; but I have been thinking it over, and I am sure it must have sounded so, and that has decided me to come and tell you something which will explain it all to you—though it is something which I have not breathed to a soul in the world as yet, and which you must preserve as a great secret until I give you leave to speak."

Uraca had felt quite uncomfortable as she heard Anna actually apologising to her, and she had tried to break in with some words of apology on her own part. Anna, however, had gone steadily on with her own speech, and now Uraca made no attempt to interrupt her, sitting very still and quiet, and waiting till she had quite got to the end of her sentence.

A queer pain seemed to be clutching hold of her heart. She wished that Anna had not come to spoil her reverie—wished that she would go without saying anything more.

"I don't think I like hearing other people's secrets," she said quickly, with a nervous movement of her hands. "Tell somebody else, Anna, if you want to—not me."

Anna had taken a seat which threw her own face into shadow, whilst that of Uraca was plainly illumined by the bright light of the hand-lamp on the toilet-table.

"But I wish to tell you, Uraca dear. It is to you that I feel I ought to tell the news. At least, I do not know exactly if it will be news to you, you have such very sharp eyes. But I am certain that I ought to tell you all about it—because — because— Oh, I hardly know how to say it; but I should be so very, very sorry if there were to come any pain to you later from not knowing before."

Uraca's face had changed. The colour had faded from her cheeks; her eyes had lost their brightness, and taken a strained look rather painful to see. There was nothing of the child in that face now; it was the face of a woman, and of a woman in anxious suspense.

"How plain she looks directly she loses her animation," thought the handsome Anna, regarding her sister critically. "Yes, I am certain I am right in my suspicions. Forward little minx! Well, I do not think it has gone so far but that it can be put a stop to without much difficulty. I am very glad I decided to

speak. I think I can manage it nicely without actually committing myself to anything untrue. Uraca is not stupid; she will understand. It seems to me where *he* is concerned she is mightily sharp. She is developing too fast."

"Pain to me?" said Uraca slowly. "I don't know what you are talking about, Anna."

"I am thinking about a great happiness which is coming into my life, dear, and which makes me very tender over my little sister to save her any possible future pain. Uraca, you have heard of love, but you are too young to know much about it. But it is the most wonderful and beautiful thing in the world, and it is that love coming into my life which makes me so very happy."

"Do you mean that you are engaged to somebody?" asked Uraca, steadying her voice, and trying to speak naturally.

"No, I do not quite mean that. There is something that comes before any talk of such a thing as an engagement—something very sweet, which is often only known to the two concerned, but which cannot possibly be mistaken when it does come. Often it is never spoken of—never admitted—especially by—by

the lady. It is something so indefinite, and yet so very, very real, that outsiders may be quite deceived for a long time. It is this, little sister, which has come into my life, and which makes me so very happy. And I wanted you to know about it, though till he *speaks* I can name it to no one else. And I think I shall not have to tell you who *he* is."

"Mr. Ratcliff, I suppose?" said Uraca in the same voice.

"Yes, dear, Mr. Ratcliff. I had thought about it before, I confess. I knew he was attracted by me from the first, and the more we saw of him, the more certain did I become. But it is only these last few days that have really decided the matter. I *know* now what I only suspected at first. We both know, though we keep up appearances even with each other. You know he is poor. He may have heard that I have money, and be holding back on that score. Or he may fear to ask me to share a life of poverty. Of course *that* would not be agreeable, but we need not think of such a thing. He may be a little time in speaking—I may have to help him out; but meantime we are sure of each other, and that is very sweet—

I think it is quite enough for the present. So now you see why what I tell you must be a secret, and why it must never be talked about except between our two selves."

Uraca was silent for some time, and then she lifted her eyes to Anna's face. Some of the light had come back to them now.

"I am glad you are so happy," she said. "I do not quite know how to congratulate people"—

"And congratulations are a little premature."

"But I hope you will be happy. Only I do not still know why you have told me—the youngest—about all this. Why should I know if papa and mamma do not?"

"Because, dear, I have seen for you a special danger which does not threaten anybody else in the house, and I would so very gladly save you from any pain—or—or—humiliation if I could."

A sparkle shone in Uraca's eyes.

"Humiliation?" she questioned breathlessly.

"Dear child, do not be angry—do not be so impetuous. Indeed, you must not misunderstand me; but I will try to show you what I mean, and if I give you a moment's pain it is

only to save you from a much worse one that might come later on. Uraca, I sometimes think that you and I are much more alike in mind and temperament than any of the others, and that that helps me to understand you better than anybody else. You are like me in this, that the petty round of daily life does not entirely satisfy you—that you look below the surface, and want something better and more lasting as you go on in life. Then, again, the ordinary persons one meets in society do not attract you, as they do not attract me. You look below the surface, as I do, and can read between the lines—can recognise true worth and nobility beneath an unpromising exterior, and have it in you to give away a generous share of love and admiration if you can find a worthy object."

Uraca sat very still and upright. The whole tone of Anna's talk jarred upon her painfully, but so far she could not find fault with the words she had spoken.

"Now, my dear little sister, I am going to be very frank with you," continued Anna, who was looking very resolute and handsome, but neither spiteful nor malicious (and, indeed,

she did not feel either one or the other, for she had almost persuaded herself that she was doing a truly sisterly and right thing); "I am afraid I may annoy you a little, but indeed I do not wish it. I think I really love you all the better for finding out so well how true and noble Mr Ratcliff really is, though it might have been better had you been a *little* more cautious how you showed your preference."

Uraca started as though she had been stung.

"Dear child, I am not blaming you," said Anna quickly. "You are very young; you have almost no knowledge of life; and poor dear mamma does *not* notice that kind of thing. I only wish she did. My dear little sister, I have suffered something myself through mamma's want of observation. I was far too much left to my own devices when I was young, and oh, how glad I should have been for the help and advice of an elder sister then! I went out younger than you are now, and just as impetuous, as unreserved, as transparent. There are times even now when I grow hot with vexation and shame

thinking of my past blunders, and how they must have struck other people. And, Uraca, that is just why I have made up my mind to speak that word of warning to you. You like Mr Ratcliff—and I am very glad that you do. You see in him things that you do not see in other men, and that makes you very happy. He is kind to you, and you think perhaps that the kindness means something more—that there is more behind."

"I don't!" cried Uraca with sudden fierceness. "Oh, why will you go on saying such cruel, such wicked things?"

"Ah, Uraca," said the elder sister gently, "you have betrayed yourself by your own vehemence. You would not think them cruel or wicked if there were not a spice of truth in them. It is always the way. If I were to tell you you had flirted with Mr Mannesty you would only laugh, because you would know it was not true. It is the truth of any such accusation that gives it its sting."

"And do you mean that you accuse me of flirting with Mr Ratcliff?" asked Uraca, whose face was very pale now.

"No, dear; flirting is altogether too big a word, and it carries an ugly meaning which does not apply at all to you, who have never meant the least harm. You have appreciated Mr Ratcliff, and you have shown your preference in a fashion which he has probably noticed,—for I think he notices everything,—but you must remember, that though you feel to yourself to be growing up, to other people you seem but a mere child. I know Mr Ratcliff looks upon you as quite a little girl (a very nice little girl, but only a half grown-up child), and so no harm whatever has been done, or will be done, if you will only be careful—be a little on your guard in the future."

"On my guard?"

"Yes, on your guard against showing how much you think of Mr Ratcliff, and how pleased you are if he takes a little notice of you. It is almost absurd now to see the way you glow and brighten if he so much as looks your way. People will notice,—he may notice,—and I know you would not like that. And he is certain to be very kind to you—now. He often tells me that you

remind him of me (only with a difference), and he likes little girls, as he has said before. He may say a good many kind and flattering things—you know gentlemen do that, even the best of them, and if they think that little girls are playing at being women, and taking them too seriously, they have a naughty habit of going rather further, to see how much fun they can get out of them. I do not say that Mr Ratcliff would do so. I only say it is a way with men, and you do look such a child that they naturally do not take you quite as seriously as you would like to be taken. I have been through it myself, dear, and oh, how I have wished in later years that I had understood what it all meant at the time, and had given them a good snubbing at once, instead of being silly enough to be pleased and flattered, and to show my pleasure! I don't think you would be a bad hand at a snub, Uraca, and I shall not resent it if you try your hand on Mr Ratcliff. He has a spice of mischief in him, I am afraid, and he certainly does see a little too far into everybody. It might do him a world of good if he were to find himself a little out in his

calculations if he tries to make game of you. And now I have said my say, and you have been very good and patient, and I will say good-night, and leave you to think it all over. You must not think I want to scold you in the least. I only want to save you from some of the keen pain and humiliation which proud people like ourselves always feel if we find out too late that we have worn our hearts upon our sleeves, and have made ourselves the least little bit ridiculous."

Then Anna rose, kissed the unresponsive face, and swept out of the room, leaving Uraca sitting in the same attitude, with hands locked together and eyes fixed upon the fire, which seemed to reflect its burning glow.

CHAPTER IX.

A DAY OF ADVENTURE.

"NOW listen to me, girls. I must ask you for the next few weeks to be very careful how you wander about the place alone —beyond the immediate precincts of the house. I hear that that fellow Binton has been seen skulking about in the woods, and I should be very sorry for any daughter of mine to encounter such an ugly customer as he might prove, alone and out of call."

"Binton—that horrid poacher?" cried Mrs Underwood, with a nervous shiver. "Surely he would not dare to show himself in these parts when he knows that there is a warrant of arrest (or whatever they call it) out against him?"

"It seems a mad thing, certainly. I don't know whether people may have been deceived or have fancied things, but Cooper certainly said he believed he had seen him, and that he

had heard of his being seen with some of the worst characters of the place at a little wayside tavern right out over the moors, some five miles distant. I suppose if we were to speak to Mr Ratcliff about it, he might track him down again, as he did that first time; but in common decency I don't feel able to do that. He got a nasty chill lying about in the woods earlier in the season, to say nothing of a broken arm, and now that October has come, and he has had a bit of an illness recently, it would be madness for him to try, and I would rather that nothing was even said to him or his friend, lest they should go out upon the quest without saying anything about it. I don't think the fellow can do us much harm now. He will not be able to stay long in a place where he dare not show his nose in daylight. He may hang about a little while, but he will tire of it and be off before long, you will see."

"I'm sure I hope he will," said Mrs Underwood, with a slight shiver. "I cannot think what the man's motive can be for staying here even for a short time."

"Well, my dear, I don't say it to make you nervous, but because I want to put these

girls on their guard. It is quite possible that the man has a desire to take some sort of vengeance upon his enemies before he makes tracks, as the Yankees say. He is an ill-conditioned fellow, and has borne us a grudge for a long time. He will not love us any the better for our having been the means of his arrest the other night, and"—

"Oh dear! oh dear!" sighed Mrs Underwood, "I almost wish we had left him alone. I shall never have an easy moment, thinking that he is skulking about the place to take something, or breaking in at night through one of the lower windows. I never do think this house too safe—I'm sure I have often said so. There are so many doors and so many windows, and"—

"Oh, nonsense, my love; that would not be at all the line Binton would take. He would never dare to come near the house. He is much more likely to hurt us, if he does think of revenge, by making away with one of the young horses at grass, or driving a cow into the river and leaving her stuck in the mud, or some trick of that sort. There is no reason in the world why you should go and make

yourself uneasy. I only mention the matter because the days are drawing in very fast now, and I don't want the girls to be careless about coming through the plantations in the dusk, as they have been accustomed to do alone, and they had better not go wandering about the woods after nuts, unless the woodman or keeper is about and within hail."

"I don't think any of us ever do go much into the woods at this time of year," said Violet. "I am sure I shall never dream of doing such a thing now. I should die of fright if I were to meet that horrid man out there alone."

"Why, you little goose, I don't suppose he would hurt you if you did meet him," said Anna, who prided herself on her courage. "I think it's a little far-fetched in these days to be afraid of secret assassination or"—

"Well, my dear," said her father, "I never take up a newspaper 'in these days,' as you call them, without reading of brutal outrages and murderous attacks being made upon persons, often on the very smallest provocation. We talk very big sometimes about the enlightenment of our own times, but I sometimes

think, as I read, that we are not so very much better off or safer than people were in darker days. I don't say all this to make you nervous or fanciful, but only to put you on your guard against false security. Things are quiet enough round us in the main, but if a miscreant like Binton is hanging round you may be sure it is for no good purpose, and I don't want any daughter of mine to be subjected to an encounter with him—even though she might get nothing worse than the rough side of his tongue."

"Well, I'm sure I don't want to meet him," said Edna. "I never do go out alone if I can help it. And we always keep to the roads, too. It is only Uraca who wanders about in the woods."

"Well, then, tell Uraca, some of you, to be careful in the future;" and the squire walked off to his farm, having relieved his mind of his charge, and the girls talked together a little about Binton, and then dismissed the matter from their thoughts.

"What is everybody's business, is nobody's business," as the saying goes, and it often proves a very true one. The charge left with the whole party about warning Uraca against

lonely rambles was destined never to reach her ears. Each member of the family took it for granted that somebody else had spoken, and as the subject of Binton never chanced to be brought up again in the girl's presence, she did not know anything about the matter, and had no idea that any veto had been laid upon her customary freedom.

Uraca was more lonely in her ways than ever just now. Her married brother and his wife and children had departed after their long summer visit, and so the girl's time was no longer engrossed by the children. Her mother, as she looked at her from time to time just now, remarked how much Uraca seemed to miss them, and wondered whether she had better send her upon a visit to Tom in his own house. It had been a thing often spoken of, but Uraca had so many interests at home, with her animals, her poor people, and her books and studies, that she had hitherto found it impossible to make up her mind to leave. It was therefore with some surprise that Mrs Underwood heard her ask if she could be spared to go and stay with Tom for some time, and leave was very readily granted.

"For you have seemed to pine, dear, ever since the children went away," said the mother; "you have not been quite like yourself, and I think a change would do you good."

"I think it would," answered Uraca. "I have never been away, like the rest. I used to think it nonsense when people talked about needing change, but I begin to understand what they mean. I think I should like a change myself, mother. I should like it soon."

"You shall have it as soon as ever you like, dear," answered easy-going Mrs Underwood, not having the smallest idea that there was something strange in this sudden break in the girl's ordinary way of thinking, and seeing nothing to cause anxiety in the lack of colour and animation in that small oval face that had hitherto been so full of life and brightness. Everything was explained by the girl's own desire for change. She was getting "moped" at home, as all young things did at times, and a change would set her up.

"You had better write to Edith at once, dear, and get it settled. I am sure they will all be delighted to have you."

But Uraca did not write at once. She

would go out now, she thought, and write later on in the day, when the short daylight had faded. Everything was a burden to her now, even the writing of a letter. And she hated unspeakably to go away. She loved her home and the free, open-air life to which she had been used, and she knew she should abominate the town life of her brother's house. Yet go she must, and that soon; for she knew that her heart was hopelessly lost to her sister's lover, and the terror lest she should betray this either to him or to others was taking every bit of peace and comfort out of her life.

Uraca had had a terrible time of it since Anna had come to her with her sisterly counsel and sisterly confidence. Truthful, sincere as the day, and intensely open and candid by nature, she was incapable of believing that her sister was deliberately deceiving her — incapable of dreaming that anything like treachery could have been at work in Anna's mind when she came to counsel and warn her.

The acuteness her sister had shown in gauging feelings scarce admitted by herself,

yet of which she was nevertheless keenly conscious, seemed sufficient guarantee that she could not have been deceived in speaking of those which were growing up towards her in Ratcliff's heart. It never occurred to Uraca to doubt that those two loved each other. It was perfectly natural they should. They were a great deal together. Anna was handsome, taking, original, and when she chose she could be gentle and winning too. They were suited (Uraca supposed) in age also; and, in fact, it had never occurred to her to discredit her sister's story in the least. She knew so little of the world. She was so sensitive, so proud, so easily shamed. She could see her conduct in another light now; her folly in taking the kindness shown to a "little girl" as something—the beginning, perhaps, of something different—something to which she knew not how to give a name. It was natural she should look up to him. He was so clever, so strong, so different from other men, even though he was neither handsome like Lieutenant Mannesty, nor tall and stalwart like her own brothers. But what was there in her—the ugly duckling of the

home party—to attract a man like that? She saw herself now as an unformed, impulsive, childish creature barely out of the schoolroom, who had shown her preferences much too plainly for good taste. Her only hope now was that he *did* look upon her as a child, and that he would not take seriously the little marks of interest and favour she had plainly shown far more than she knew.

Perhaps some day, when he was her brother-in-law, and she had got over this miserable feeling,—people *did* get over such things, she had been told,—she should be able to meet him again without feeling as though her whole heart were being stabbed through and through; but now it was a daily penance to have to meet him, and she avoided doing so whenever she could. It was easy to do this in the shorter days, when the friends did not drop in in the evenings quite so often, and when, if they were coming to dinner, she could often make an excuse to slip off to the vicarage to get the club books and lending library put into order—tasks in which she always assisted the vicar's wife, and in which

she made herself exceedingly useful and helpful.

It chanced that she had in this way managed to avoid seeing Ratcliff for full ten days, and was hoping, now that she was to go to pay her brother a visit, that she would not meet him any more. She knew that every day thus spent without a sight of him seemed a day lost out of her life, but she also knew that it was the only thing for her, and that the pain would but increase if she let herself go on meeting him day by day; and at least, whatever she suffered, he would cease to think that she cared too much for him—the very thought of which sent the hot blood tingling to her very finger tips.

"I hate myself for it!" she cried half aloud, as she plunged into her favourite woodland path, walking fast in her stress of feeling. "I am not ashamed of my feeling for him,—he is worthy, and I would rather love (I suppose that is the right word) worthily, even though he may never love back. But to betray it to others—that is the terrible part of it! To make myself a laughing-stock—to let even him see it—oh, that would be too terrible! It was

kind of Anna to warn me, though I almost hated her for it at the time; but I can be grateful now. I do not think anybody else knew it. I don't think even he did, and he thought me quite a little girl. If I can only get away now —quickly, and only see him when they are engaged and one can treat him as a sort of brother, that will be much better; and he will have had time to forget. Yes, I will go away. I will go very quickly—I might even go to-morrow if I asked Edith to telegraph. I shall be happier away I am miserable here. The children will help me to forget better than anybody else."

Hurrying on aimlessly through the winding woodland paths, driven by the stress of her own feelings, Uraca neither knew nor heeded where she was going, and was too much engrossed to hear the sound of approaching footsteps. All at once the path made a sharp turn to the left. She rounded the turn and stood quite still, the blood ebbing away from her cheeks as she did so. For there, in the middle of the path, a dog at his heels and his gun beneath his arm, stood none other than the man with whom her thoughts

had been so busily engaged—Mr Ratcliff himself.

She stopped suddenly short, and he took off his cap.

"Well met, Miss Uraca! I thought I was never to see you again. I have asked for you in vain times without number. Where have you been hiding yourself all these last days?"

Uraca's face flamed. She was so miserably self-conscious that she fancied there was a taunt in the last words—not unkindly meant, in all probability, but a brotherly bit of teasing she was in no way disposed to accept at his hands. She drew herself up, and answered with needless coolness—

"I have been very busy. There are a great many things to see to at the beginning of the winter; I always have plenty to do then. I hope your arm is better?"

"Yes—out of its sling, you see. I think your good doctor has been rather astonished at the way it has knit. He says he never had such a rapid case of fracture before. I suppose it partly comes from being so well looked after when it was first done. You used to be kind to me then, Miss Uraca. I don't know

whether I have offended you since. You have cold-shouldered me pretty considerably."

Uraca's heart was beating fast. It was always the way when Mr Ratcliff talked to her. There was something about him that seemed to dominate and enslave her. She felt as if she would have given anything in the world to be able to tell him all the trouble, and have the weight of her own secret and Anna's off her mind. But her common sense told her that such a thing as that was utterly out of the question; and, in self-defence, she took a rather off-hand manner.

"I don't know what you mean quite. I have told you that I have been very busy. There are plenty at home to be kind to visitors; I very seldom have much to do with them. And as I am soon going away, I must do all I can to get my duties accomplished."

"Are you going away?" The question was very quickly spoken, and accompanied by a fleeting look which sent thrills through the girl's pulses.

"Yes, probably either to-morrow or the next day."

"I had heard nothing of it," he said, looking

thoughtfully down at his boots. "Is it not a sudden plan?"

"I don't know what you call sudden. Tom and Edith have always been asking me. I have decided at last to go. I miss the children, and I shall like being with them again."

"Ah, those children!" he said in a low tone, and for a moment stood silent. Uraca made an attempt to pass on her way. She felt that this conversation must be put an end to quickly. Her movement caused him to start out of his reverie, and he put out his hand as if to detain her.

"Uraca," he said, in a voice that sent a strange thrill all through her again, "I do not wish that you should go."

She laughed. It was a laugh that sounded unnatural in her own ears; she would not have known it for hers.

"I don't want to be rude," she said, "but really I must remind you that my affairs are no business of yours, Mr Ratcliff; and you have no right to call me by my name—yet."

His deep-set grey eyes flashed wide open, and fixed themselves full upon her face; but

Uraca, who was trembling in every limb, would not allow herself to look at him. Her sister's warning was in her ears. All she thought of was that this man was teasing her, playing with her, trying to make her glow and kindle at his words as Anna had told her she had done before. Then he would go back to Anna, perhaps, and laugh over it with her. The thought was simply intolerable. She set her teeth, and a wild impulse of defiance came over her. She heard Ratcliff's next words, but the sense of them was entirely perverted. Her head was reeling, and there was a sound in her ears as of surging waves dashing and foaming round her.

"That right I mean to win, Uraca. And I claim that I *have* a right even now to bid you stay. I ask you to postpone this visit—if it is only for a week. Surely that is no very great favour to ask?"

"I don't know what you call a favour. I don't know what you call a right. I cannot see that you have any at all now; and even by and by I cannot see that it will give you one. I have enough people to order me about as it is; I will not accept another.

Good-afternoon, Mr Ratcliff. I don't want to interrupt your walk, or to stand talking in the cold any longer."

Springing by him with fleet footsteps, and disregarding the gesture he made to detain her, Uraca slipped away, and vanished in the gathering shadows of the wood. She knew every twist and turning of those intricate paths, and was certain that she could baffle him, even if he tried to follow her. But she did not think he would. It was only some silly bit of fraternal teasing he was amusing himself with, and he had no right at this juncture (even if he thought Anna had said anything to her) to presume upon the relationship that might soon exist between them. Anna was right: there was something hateful about men. At that moment she almost hated Mr Ratcliff, and rejoiced in the thought that she had been brusque and rude to him. Perhaps now he would forget that she had ever seemed to like him. He would certainly not be likely to take liberties with her any more. Most likely he would dislike her cordially, and think her a very ill-mannered and hoydenish young person. Uraca hoped

he would, she told herself,—hoped he would never care to speak to her again. And then, as if to give the lie to this bold statement on her part, she suddenly broke into wild though silent weeping, and flung herself, face downwards, upon a heap of withered leaves that had gathered at the foot of a giant oak-tree.

How long she lay weeping there she did not know. Tears brought to her a measure of relief, the wild confusion of her senses passed away, and calmness began to return. But still she did not move. There was something restful in lying thus upon the ground in this quiet wood, where she was safe from interruption, and where only the voices of nature were about and around her. Soon she would be far away: far from home, far from *him!* Then, indeed, she must strive to forget, and to begin life again. But just for these few moments might she not let her mind dwell once more on that wonderful happiness that *might* perhaps have been hers, if another, and a worthier, had not stood in her way?

Was she so much alone as she had believed? Surely that was the sound of a stealthy tread approaching the spot where she lay? Could it

be that Ratcliff had followed her? She had hardly asked this question before she sprang to her feet, and came face to face, not with the man of whom she was thinking, but with the ex-woodman Binton.

Surprise held her mute, rooted to the ground. She was not frightened, though there was an expression upon the man's evil face that might well have alarmed her.

"Binton—you here!" she exclaimed. "That is very foolish of you. I believe I ought to give notice of it to the police. You know they are after you. But somehow I hate to do an injury to a fellow-creature, and you gave me a pair of tame squirrels once, and you were always kind to your dog; so if you will only get quickly away, I will say nothing till you have had time to escape to a safe place. But do be quick about it. There is somebody in the wood, I know—I met a man with a gun not long ago, and old Cooper may be about too. They will not be so much inclined to let you go, so you had better make haste whilst you can."

There was such an ugly gleam in the man's eyes now that Uraca felt a thrill of personal

uneasiness. She knew the place was very lonely. Ratcliff would be far enough away by this time. She had seen nobody else as she had passed through the paths. She wished now that she had brought the dogs with her, but her father objected to their presence in the covers.

Binton was fingering a heavy knobbed stick that he held in his hand. His face was full of evil passions.

"I will go soon enough, Miss Uraca: but I've vowed vengeance on the squire, and I'm not the man to go back from my word. It'll be a fine revenge if I beat out the brains of one of his young ladies, and I may as well swing for one thing as another. I've got you now, and you can't escape me. I think I shall kill you before I've done."

CHAPTER X.

TO THE RESCUE.

URACA'S face was pale. She felt the extremity of her peril; but she had the high courage which came to her through a race of ancestors who had been soldiers in their days, and she resolved that if she must die out here alone, in this familiar woodland dell, she would die bravely, and not allow the ruffian who was thus threatening her to see the fear his threats awakened.

And it was hard to realise that he could do so dastardly and brutal an act. She had known the man, and had always had a pleasant word for him, notwithstanding his many ill deeds. Uraca was always hopeful about the black sheep on the place; she always held that they might think better of their evil ways, and be led by kindness to amend. Binton had been no favourite of hers, but he was clever with animals, and had sometimes done her a service

with her pets. She had got on with him better than any of the others. Could it really be that he would do her grievous bodily injury?—that he would even take her life? She could not believe it; and yet there was something very terrible in the look of his eyes. It seemed to her that there was the light of madness in them. Perhaps he had been hiding away until his mind was almost deranged through the fear of capture and the loneliness of his position. Possibly he had been consoling himself by drinking, and had wrought himself up to frenzy. She could not tell which it might be; but she felt that any power she might have had over the man if he had been in his sober senses was now utterly gone. She might as well have addressed remonstrances to a maniac as to him. She felt that her only chance of safety lay in keeping perfectly calm, and not allowing her eyes to wander from his face. Her fixed gaze slightly disconcerted him; and she felt this, and continued to regard him steadily.

"I could wish that it had been one of the others," said the man, speaking very slowly as he still fingered the heavy stick he held. "I've always liked you the best of the lot, Miss

Uraca ; but that makes no manner of difference to me now. I've my oath to keep, and I've vowed vengeance on the squire, and I 'll have my vengeance, be the end what it may. I've a score to wipe off against another, too ; and he shall be the next. If I'd got my gun with me, I'd have shot you dead as you stood—it would maybe have been an easier death ; but I've nought but this stick in my hand as it is. I don't think I 'll have to strike twice, though. If you dare to cry out, I'll do worse by you. You 'd best take it quietly ;" and the ruffian shortened the stick in his hand and made one step towards the girl, who stood with her head thrown back, her eyes wide open, and one glowing spot of colour in each pale cheek.

" Move one step nearer and you are a dead man."

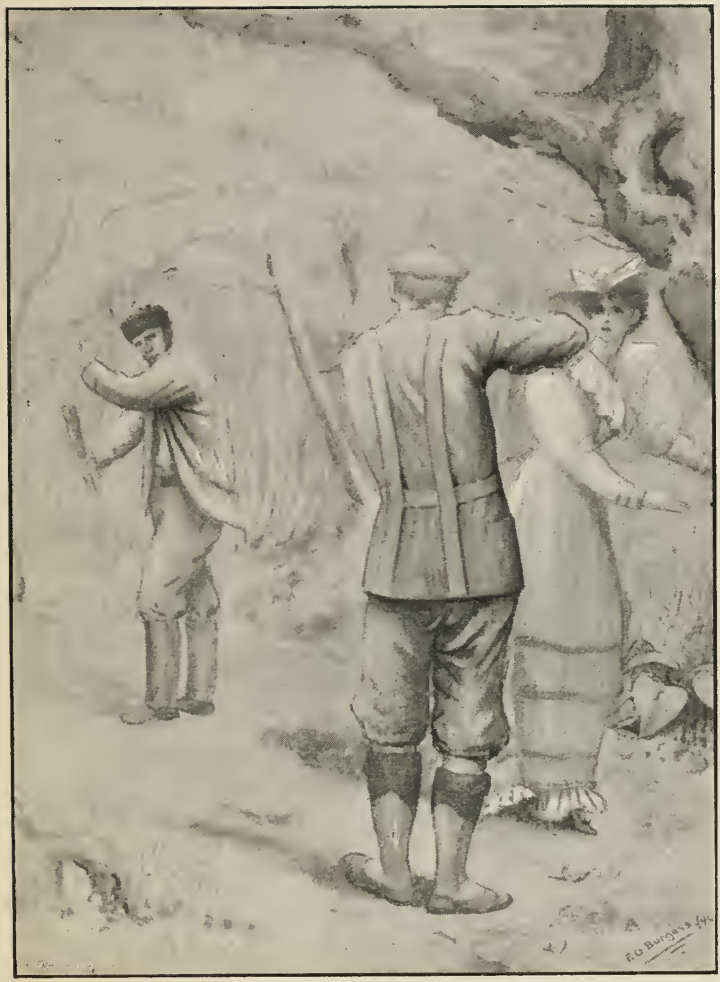
The words were very quietly spoken, but there was a ring in the voice which made them carry as though they had been shouted out in stentorian tones. Binton uttered a savage oath, but remained rooted to the spot, glaring like a wild beast at bay at something behind Uraca ; and the girl, released from the fearful tension of

the last few minutes, turned quickly round to find herself face to face with Ratcliff.

He did not look at her. His eyes were fixed upon her brutal assailant. He had his gun raised and pointed full at the man. His eyes were gleaming strangely beneath the overhanging brows.

"Move but one step forward or back, and I fire," continued the young man, in the same quietly inflexible way. "You know, James Routh, whether or no I am likely to miss my mark. Miss Uraca, will you kindly run a few hundred yards to the place where the trees are being marked for felling? I saw several men there not many minutes ago, and I think they will be there still. This time we will make sure of our man. If he attempts to escape, I shoot and disable him. I will take the risk with the authorities, after what I have heard and seen to-day. But I do not think I shall have to do it. A blackguard who can threaten a woman is always an ingrained coward."

Uraca gave him one look, and sped off like an arrow from a bow. She did not let herself think of the scene she had just been through.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She did not let herself think of him who had come to her aid at such a moment. She thought of nothing but the errand he had given her to do—of the possible peril he might himself be in from the man, mad and desperate, over whom he was keeping guard. It was not until she had summoned assistance, and had seen the fellow bound hand and foot (they were careful of their captive that time), and carried away to the keeper's lodge till the police could be summoned, that she really felt to be living in anything but a hideous dream; and she seemed to herself to awake out of this to find her hands held fast in those of Ratcliff, whilst his eyes were gazing into hers with a look she strove hard to avoid. But it was no use. His gaze riveted hers, and she felt the hot blood mounting in her cheeks, whilst her heart beat in bounds and throbs of joy which she tried in vain to hold in check. What was it? What could it all mean?

"Uraca, my darling, tell me that you are not hurt? He had not dared to lay hands upon you before I came?"

She shook her head. She could not speak. What was it he had called her?

Had her ears deceived her? Were her senses going?

He continued to look full at her. She felt as though he were drawing her soul out through her eyes and into himself. It was an extraordinary sensation, it turned her almost giddy. Was it all a dream, or was it not? He still held her hands, she had no power to withdraw them. She felt the master spirit triumphing over her will—her very being; but there was no pain in such surrender.

"Uraca," he said in very low tones, "do you love me?"

For one moment she struggled against answering him.

"You have no right to ask me that question. You are all but the affianced husband of another."

His eyes never wavered for a moment from hers. He simply repeated his question in the same tone as before. "Uraca, do you love me?"

She could struggle no longer.

"I do love you," she answered, throwing back her head with an air that was almost like that of defiance, "but"—

She never finished that sentence; it was the last "but" that passed her lips in regard to Ratcliff and her love for him. He had her in his arms before she had got out another word. For a moment she forgot Anna, forgot the whole of the world besides. She and he were in a world of their own that left room for none else. The happiness of such a moment was entire and complete.

"Uraca, Uraca," he said at last, as they wandered through the woodland paths together, her hand on his arm,—"or Cara, as I think I have won the right to call you now, — what has come over you of late? Did you do it on purpose to try me?—to prove your power over me? I did not think my simple little Cara was mistress of such artifice. What has it been all about, Cara? You will have to tell me now. We must have no secrets from each other;" and he smiled to himself as he spoke.

"I—I thought it was Anna you cared for," answered Uraca, hesitating how to explain without betraying her sister, for whom she now felt sincerely sorry, thinking she had been building upon false hopes. "You were so

very much with her; and Anna is very much admired. And I thought—I thought"—

Ratcliff's eyes were fixed upon her face with a peculiarly penetrating gaze.

"I see," he said very quietly. "We will not talk of Anna any more. She tried to teach you her own code of manners, did she not? She tried to make you afraid of yourself, to frighten you into shyness not natural to you? How do I know? Oh, I only use my eyes and ears. A great deal may be read between the lines, and Miss Underwood is not very discreet in what she says and does. I thought it was to her I owed this recent difficulty in getting a single word with my Cara; but I was not afraid that it would last. I did not intend that it should last. I was going to put an end to it sooner or later, even without this. I knew my instincts had not deceived me. But she is your sister; we will not let it trouble us any more."

Uraca was delighted to let that matter slip into the background of her mind. She did not know or suspect that Anna had gone about to try and thwart the dawnings of a love she had seen on one side and suspected on the other;

but she saw now that her sister had taken her to task in a way that was neither kind nor needful, and only her compassion for Anna's disappointment enabled her to lay aside all angry or bitter feelings. The pain, though it had been very acute, had all passed away now. Everything was so bright round her own path, that she could afford to be generous.

"It hardly seems fair that I should have everything," she said, with a happy little laugh. "I am the youngest, I ought to wait till the last."

He turned one of his quick looks upon her.

"The ugly duckling—eh, Cara? Has not that been your name as well as mine? only that I have had no brothers and sisters to contrast with me to my own disadvantage. But we all know the ultimate fate of that remarkable bird. Will it be the same in our case, do you think?"

"Oh no," answered Uraca eagerly; "I know we shall be quite poor, but I don't mind that a bit. I think I rather like it. I shall never be the least like a stately swan. I would much rather be a nice homely duck, paddling about my own little pond, without any ambitions or dreams for the future. I never

did care for grand people and grand places. I like things plain and simple best."

Ratcliff was smiling. "So you are not afraid of poverty, are you?"

"Oh no, not a bit. I think I should like it very much. But people will say you made a great mistake; for Anna has a good deal of money of her own, and I suppose that would have been an advantage to you."

"Money is reckoned an advantage in most walks of life, but I think that you and I will be able to rub along comfortably on what I have got. I must talk to your father about that. What will he say to giving you up to me, away from this comfortable and luxurious home?"

Uraca's face was grave for a moment, but it cleared up quickly as she said, "Oh, I do not think papa will mind much as long as it is only me. He knows that I do not care for the expensive things that the others want. Why, I nearly always make my own frocks, and I don't cost half as much as the rest. Of course I'm not properly out yet; but I don't care for society, and we shall have none, of course, if we are poor. Papa may not like it quite as well as if you had more money; but he knows

that I do not need luxuries and expensive things, and I don't think he will be very hard to talk over."

"And you are quite sure of yourself, my Cara?" asked Ratcliff very gravely and tenderly. "You must remember that you have never really known what poverty is like, and that you have been accustomed to a life of ease and plenty. You know that people are fond of saying (and there is generally a sound substratum of truth in homely proverbs) that when poverty comes in at the door, love flies out at the window. Do you think that would be the case with us, if the time should come when you could not have such things as you were used to, and we had to do what is suggestively called 'pinch and screw' to make ends meet? Do you think that I ought to ask you to share a life that had any such possibility before it?"

Uraca's lips had parted once or twice as this sentence had proceeded; now, as the last words fell upon her ear, she turned her face towards Ratcliff (how was it, he thought, that that face had ever been called plain?), and she answered him in very low, earnest tones,

that vibrated with the depth of her own feeling.

"Yes, I do think that you ought to ask me to share it—to ask me to share anything and everything that lies before you—now that you have made me tell you that I love you, and have told me that you love me yourself. When those words have been spoken—when we know that we belong to each other—then there can be no drawing back. It is too late to think of anything else. You know—I am sure you must know now—that poverty or hardship, *anything*, shared with you would be sweeter than life in a palace if you were not there. If you were afraid of poverty, you should have thought of that before. Now I claim the right to share that, as all else, with you. I will toil for you, suffer for you (if need be), as well as love you. You have given me this right, and now I will not yield it up to any one."

There was a proud light in the girl's eyes as she spoke. If her words were unconventional, she did not know—did not care. She knew that he to whom they were spoken would not misunderstand either them or her. And she

had her reward in the glance flashed back at her from Ratcliff, as he pressed the hand upon his arm.

"That is enough, my Cara," he said. "We will share life together for weal or woe. Whatever the future holds for you, from me you will accept without a murmur, because all that is mine is thine?"

"Yes," she answered firmly, "it is just that. I have the right to share it now because I love you, and you have asked me to share all with you."

Had she caught the shadowy smile upon his face she might have wondered what was in his thoughts, but the proud gladness of the eyes would have gone far to reassure her had any vague misgiving crossed her mind. But there was no room there for anything but the gladdest happiness and thankfulness. She trod on air as she walked beside him, and presently she spoke again.

"I don't think papa could object, for another reason. You saved my life to-day. I think that Binton would have killed me. I do not think he was trying to scare me only for pleasure. I believe he is half mad, and that he meant it."

"I believe he did," answered Ratcliff between his shut teeth.

"And if you had not been there"— Uraca put her hand up for a moment before her eyes, and he caught hold of the other hand which lay upon his arm.

"Do not think of that," he said in a low voice. "I was there. That is enough."

She was able to smile then, though only faintly; for the recollection of those minutes was very vivid, and not a little terrible.

"I do not know how it was that you were there," she said. "I have not had time to ask you that."

"It is soon explained. When you left me, I felt that our interview had been highly unsatisfactory. I felt sure there was some misunderstanding in your mind which I could explain away; and opportunities for meeting alone are not plentiful just now, so I presently turned and followed you. It was easy to trace your steps in the soft moss and leaves; but when I came upon you, you were lying on the ground sobbing, and I did not feel that I could interrupt you at that occupation, though it increased my suspicion that there

was a mare's nest somewhere. You had not heard me, so I walked away a little, resolving to come back after I had given you time to recover yourself. When I did so, I heard the sound of voices. I very soon heard the tones of that man you call Binton, and I felt certain there was mischief meant. So I loaded both barrels of my gun as I came up, and was in time to hear him threaten your life. The rest you know."

"I do indeed," answered Uraca, with a little shiver. "I shall never forget hearing your voice when I thought that there was no help for me possible. Once I used to think that I should not like to owe anybody my life—but I think I am very glad that I owe it to you."

"Perhaps I am glad too," answered Ratcliff, with a smile. "And I am glad, too, to know how brave and fearless my wife can show herself in a moment of deadly peril."

"Was I brave?" asked Uraca smiling. "I did not feel so. I was horribly frightened, only I did not wish him to see it."

"Perhaps that is the true secret of a good deal of our vaunted courage," answered Rat-

cliff, with a smile. "But here we are at your own gate. May I come in? Or would you rather I left you here?"

But before Uraca had time to answer that question, Anna came hurrying out, saying—

"Oh, Uraca, mamma has been in such a fright about you. Somebody has just said you were seen going into the wood. Did nobody tell you not to do that? because Binton has been seen skulking about, and papa was afraid—Oh, is that you, Mr Ratcliff? It is so dark I did not see you. Come in and have some tea. Uraca, go and tell mamma you are home safe. You really should not do such things."

"Nobody told me," said Uraca, hurrying away with crimson cheeks to report herself in the drawing-room; whilst Ratcliff, as he sauntered up the path by Anna's side, remarked—

"It's like locking the stable door when the steed is gone. Uraca had an encounter with Binton in the wood not an hour ago; but luckily I was passing that way, and now the fellow is in custody, and will not be at large again for some time to come. Your woods are safe again now, and the veto, so far as he is

concerned, may be removed. I am glad the brute is likely to get a good long sentence. Such fellows are not safe at large."

"You saved Uraca from Binton, and brought her home, and got the man taken into custody? Oh, how pleased everybody will be! How very kind of you! Do come in and tell us all about it? Papa will be immensely interested. Really, it is quite an excitement for this dead-alive little place!"

Ratcliff followed Anna into the house, the girl feeling how much she wished she had been the heroine of the adventure, and thinking that it was a shame so many of the good things of life were thrown away upon Uraca, who could make no manner of use of them. She was quite at ease in her mind now about her younger sister, and had had no qualms of jealousy ever since delivering that curtain lecture which had plainly been greatly taken to heart. She guessed why Uraca looked pale and spiritless, and thought what a good thing it was to have nipped her foolish fancy in the bud. Ratcliff and she had hardly met since then. This encounter could not be helped, but it was not an occasion which gave scope for

anything of a sentimental ending. She did not even feel disturbed about it.

In the drawing-room great excitement was being aroused by Uraca's tale, and Ratcliff's prowess did not lose in her telling of it. He laughed a little at hearing himself extolled as a hero for facing a man who was only armed with a stick, when he himself had a loaded gun in his hands, but remarked that it was very pleasant to win his spurs so cheaply.

"The thing was this," said the squire, "the fellow knew that you meant what you said when you told him you would fire if he moved —I mean when you were waiting for help to come up. Of course, any fellow would have fired to protect my child from his ruffianly attack; but in these days of hyper-sentimentality lots of men would have been afraid to shoot if it was only to prevent his getting away. They might have threatened, but would not have dared to act upon the threat; but Binton knew you, and knew that you meant what you said. That kept him quiet, and saved you the necessity for taking the law into your own hands."

Ratcliff smiled slightly.

"Oh yes; Binton, as you call him, knew well enough that I would as soon shoot him as look at him. I knew my gentleman in old days. I saw the corpse of the woman he had practically beaten to death once. I was not likely to stay my hand from motives of what you truly call hyper-sentimentality;" and for a moment the young man's face was set in stern lines that gave it an altogether new character of its own.

"He could be fearfully angry if he chose," thought Anna, with a very slight sense of misgiving creeping over her. "I wonder what he would think if he knew the whole story about Uraca and me? Well, thank goodness, he is not likely to know it."

Ratcliff saw that this was not the moment to speak privately with the squire. He could not well ask for the daughter's hand within an hour of having, as it certainly seemed, saved her from a hideous death. It would not be right to take advantage of the feeling aroused by such an event. He would go away now, and let a little time elapse before speaking.

He strode gaily down to the "Two Salmon

Heads," and found Mannesty busy with his fly-hook.

"Well, old fellow," he said cheerily, "I must not keep you in the dark—the deed is done."

"Ah—really!" exclaimed Mannesty, looking up quickly. "I thought it about time. And which of the ladies is it?"

"Need you ask?"

"Well, no, I don't think I need. It was the ugly duckling all along. It strikes me that will become a misnomer as the young lady blossoms out into womanhood. Well, I wish you joy, old fellow, and I don't think you will regret your choice. You see, as it is, you will be a well-matched pair, whereas if you had thought fit to select one of the others, you might have chanced to go about under the designation of 'Beauty and the Beast.'"

CHAPTER XI.

URACA'S FOLLY.

"WELL, Uraca, all I can say is that you are the most deceitful little chit I ever did see! I wonder you have the impudence to look me in the face at all after the artful way you have been going on. I would not have believed it of you—no, I really would not!"

Uraca's face flushed. For a moment her eyes sparkled as if with anger, but the next moment all the anger died away, for in her heart of hearts she thought that Anna was more to be pitied than any other creature on the face of the earth.

Ratcliff was in the study with her father. He had asked for a private interview, and Uraca's blushing face had plainly told what the nature of his errand was. Anna, rudely awakened from the dream she had been indulging (though it must be confessed she

had grown of late a little discouraged by her inability to bring her wished-for lover to the point), followed her sister out into the garden, and there taxed her with her own suspicion as to the nature of Ratcliff's errand. Uraca made no attempt to deny it, whereupon Anna turned upon her in something very like fury.

"But, Anna, how have I been deceitful?" asked poor Uraca. "You know you scolded me once for showing my feelings too much. After that I hardly spoke to Mr Ratcliff till we met in the wood, and then I told him I didn't want to talk to him, and ran away very rudely. It was only after he had saved my life, and asked me straight out if—if—I cared for him, that I said one word. I could not tell a falsehood then. That *would* have been deceitful."

Anna set her teeth hard and tried to control her impotent anger. Her face was very scornful and supercilious.

"Well, a nice mess you have made of your life, my dear, that is all I have to say on the subject. I 'm sure I hope, for both your sakes, that papa will not give his consent."

"Oh, Anna, why?"

"Because a life of poverty—narrow means, hard work, and none of the luxuries you have been used to—will pretty soon wear out your little schoolgirl love; I know a little better than you do what men are like, and I tell you plainly that when this foolish fancy has worn itself out (which it very soon will do), your lover will turn into a bear of a husband, and will lead you a nice life for dragging him down to sordid poverty. Alone, he can have a pleasant time enough—travelling here and there with pupils, and being his own master to all intents and purposes. But with a wife—and a family, perhaps—ah, he will pretty soon see the difference then, and you, my dear, will have to bear the brunt of his temper, which I am convinced can be a villainously bad one."

Uraca's eyes were bravely bright. Words like these did not hurt her, convinced as she was that Ratcliff's love equalled hers, and that no lot would be hard that was gilded by such love. But Anna's words surprised her, and she could not quite conceal her surprise. She was perhaps a little too ready to speak the words that came into her mind.

"But, Anna," she said questioningly, "I do not think *you* were afraid of his temper? You did not seem to be when—when you told me that you—loved him—yourself."

Anna started as if she had been stung, and laughed harshly.

"Told you I loved him? You must be dreaming, Uraca. I am perfectly certain I never said or dreamed any such thing."

Uraca's eyes opened wide.

"I thought you meant that, that evening you came to my room. You must remember the things you said. They could only mean one thing."

"Oh, I know what you mean," said Anna, with heightened colour, as if only just struck by a sudden memory; "but they did not mean anything like what you thought, you sentimental child. Mr Ratcliff was paying me a great deal of attention just then; he certainly appeared to be on the verge of a declaration; and I had made up my mind that I might as well make him happy. I had money enough to live comfortably, however narrow his means might be, and on the whole I thought I might do worse. He is rather an interesting man

at first, though I must confess one gets very tired of him after a bit. I was afraid you would go and throw yourself into his arms if I did not do something to stop you, and so I told you what I thought was going to happen. As a matter of fact, I was either mistaken, or he has changed his mind—most probably the latter, seeing, perhaps, that I was growing rather bored by his company. There is something very tiresome about him. He soon ceases to be attractive, as you will find one of these days for yourself. As for sharing a life of poverty with him, such an idea as that would never have entered my head. I should have thought it perfect madness. I always told you that I could do things the rest of you ought not to dream of, and even I had begun to find I had made a mistake. I 'm sure the man has a fearful temper of his own, and there is a vein of recklessness about him which I confess I should not care about in a husband of mine. But fortunately for all parties he is not going to be that."

Uraca heaved a sigh of relief.

"I am so glad," she breathed softly.

"Glad of what?" was the sharp answer.

"Glad that you do not really *care* for him. I have been so very, very sorry—for you."

Anna's laugh was not very pleasant to hear.

"Oh, for goodness' sake, child, do not look upon me as an object of pity! I don't believe I should ever have made up my mind to such an insignificant little snip when it really came to the point. And a life of poverty with a creature like that would be simply unendurable, as you will probably find out for yourself one of those days. However, you will suit very well together—a pair of ugly ducklings. Oh!"—

The pause and the exclamation — which however, was uttered coolly enough—were caused by the appearance of Ratcliff himself round the corner of the leafless shrubbery path.

Anna had been speaking in her loud, rapid way, and the air was still and quiet, so that it was quite possible her words had been heard. But Ratcliff's face betrayed nothing, and she was in a reckless and defiant mood, and did not care. What was this prospective brother-in-law to her? She did not think it at all likely she should come much across him in the

future. She hated small houses, and narrow pinching ways, and there would be always something galling in the remembrance of the days which had just gone by.

"I suppose I shall be *de trop* now," she said, as she left Uraca's side and swept towards the house. "I hope I may wish you joy, Mr Ratcliff. I suppose you have got you own way with papa?"

"He has been good enough to sanction our engagement, thank you, Miss Underwood. I presume you think him a very foolish man for doing so?"

"Well, I do, if you wish to know," answered Anna, with a toss of the head. "For my part, I don't believe in love in a cottage. I don't think you had any right to take advantage of a child like Uraca, who is much too young to know her own mind, and I think she is a little goose for taking so seriously the first flattering words she has heard spoken to her in her life. However, it is no business of mine, and I wash my hands of it. You will probably both of you come to your senses when it is too late."

Anna swept away in lofty scorn, rather

pleased with herself for administering this all-round snub, and not pausing to consider in what execrably bad taste such words were, coming from one who had no right whatever to speak them, and who was, after all, not much more than a girl herself. But Anna had for so long arrogated to herself a place in the household which no really judicious mother would have given her, that she often forgot what her right position was. She frequently made herself ridiculous when she most wished to be dignified, and certainly she appeared highly ridiculous in the eyes of her future brother-in-law.

Uraca's face was crimson with shame and pain, but when she caught the expression upon Ratcliff's she could not help laughing.

"The two ugly ducklings must console one another," he said, as he held out his hand towards her. "My little Uraca, my Cara, has she scared you with her sombre threats of the sordid life that awaits you as my wife?"

"As if any one could do that!" cried Uraca, with fond pride. "As if I cared for anything so long as we shared it together! Oh, I am so happy! You are sure there is no mistake?

You are sure papa is not going to stop it? I have been so afraid what he would say. I know the others think that it would be very foolish to marry without plenty of money, but I can do with so much less than they. And I like simple ways, and planning and contriving. At the vicarage I have quite a good name for being managing and economical. You will see how far I will make things go;" and Uraca nodded her head with pretty archness, which evoked a smile from Ratcliff.

"And we shall have enough to live on, my Cara; I have been able to satisfy your father about that. I do not think it would have been right to ask you to share a life of grinding poverty; but it will not be that, and many people are very happy upon quite small means, are they not?"

"Of course they are. It is love, not money, that makes the happiness of life. I don't want to be silly, but I cannot see that money has much to do with it. Some of our richest friends are certainly the most grumpy and discontented, and I know lots of poor people who are quite happy. Papa did not mind?"

"He was rather taken aback at first, and

told me I had made a great mistake, and that your eldest sister was the 'catch' of the family, as she had a fortune of her own; but as I declined to transfer my suit to her, he was graciously pleased to listen to what I had to say, and in the end he gave us his blessing. I do not think you will find him displeased, though, no doubt, he will tease you a little about the come-down in life awaiting you."

Uraca laughed happily as she clung to his arm.

"As though it could be a 'come-down' when it is to be with you!" she said in the irrational fashion of a betrothed maiden.

"Wait until you see what it will be like, my Cara. Your palaces are all in the air as yet."

"They are not palaces, they are nice, comfortable, little cosy cottages," answered Uraca brightly. "I have built and furnished so many that you will find me quite knowing when the time comes. But I want you to tell me more about yourself. Why, I do not even know your name, and I suppose I must not call you Mr Ratcliff any more."

"Certainly not; you will have to call me Ratcliff instead."

"Ratcliff?" she repeated; "but I want to know your Christian name."

"Ratcliff is my Christian name," he answered, laughing. "Was it not foolish of my parents? It is like the William Williams and Griffith Griffiths one comes across so much in Wales. Still, one name does as well as another, and my intimate friends, who have a sense of the fitness of things, cut me down to the happy sobriquet of Rat."

"I shan't call you Rat, and I won't let anybody else do it either," cried Uraca, laughing. "But I think Ratcliff suits you, though it is funny to have only one name. Have you any parents living, Ratcliff? I want to know all about everything. You know all about me and my family, but I don't know anything about you."

"You shall do so soon, dear; I have settled all that with your father. Yes, my parents are both alive and well, and not so very old, either. You must come and see and get to know them, and love and be loved. I am sure they will welcome you as a daughter very gladly. I am going very soon to see them, and to tell them of the good fortune I have

won. After that you must come and let them see you. I think there will be no difficulty about that. You would like to know them, would you not, my Cara?"

"Oh yes, indeed," she answered, with pretty eagerness; "but you must tell them what an ugly duckling I am. I should not like them to be dreadfully disappointed when I appear, and I'm afraid you do not half realise what a mistake you have made in picking the ugly one out of the whole family."

"I'm afraid I don't either," he answered, laughing. "But I will try and prepare them for the shock they will have when they see my affianced bride in the flesh." And then the talk took the inevitable turn that made it interesting only to the lovers themselves, and no more was seen of Ratcliff or Uraca until the bell called them in to luncheon.

The next few days sped by very happily for Uraca. Anna had the grace to restrain her sharp speeches; Edna and Violet were quite kind in their rather indolent fashion, for they were not in the least jealous of their younger sister, and thought it just as well that one of the four should get married off, and out of the

way. If Uraca was going to turn out "taking," as they had turned out beautiful, it was fortunate she should take herself off. They did not envy her her lot, but thought it would do very well for her, as she had such very simple tastes. Ratcliff came to and fro to the house very much as he pleased for those few days, and then he went away to tell his parents, and there was a vague understanding that he would write to the squire later, and arrange for a visit from Uraca and some of the others to his home.

Very jovial indeed, was the squire in those days, and very much kindly teasing did Uraca have to endure at his hands.

"What a fine mess you have made of your prospects in life, little miss!" he would sometimes say, as she sat beside him in an evening, whilst he looked smilingly into her bright face. "A fine thing you think it to have been the first to catch a husband!—but how will you like it when you have to leave your comfortable home, your dogs and your horse, and all the things you have been used to, and go and live—ah, well, where will you live? Has Ratcliff told you anything about that?"

and the father's eyes would twinkle merrily.

"No, he has not settled yet, I think," Uraca would answer; "but I do not feel at all afraid. I don't think I mind much what it is like. I can make up my mind to like anything."

"You will have to make up your mind to like something vastly different from anything you have known before, I take it, my dear," the squire would respond, and then he would laugh again to himself.

If Uraca had not been very much preoccupied in those days she might have guessed from her father's manner that there was some surprise in store for her for which she had not prepared herself; but as it was, her unconsciousness remained complete, and her thoughts were all of the humble little home that she was to brighten and make happy for her lover.

One day the squire came into the drawing-room, where his wife and daughters were sitting, with an open letter in his hand, which had arrived by the second post.

"Here is Ratcliff's invitation," he said. "It seems that his parents are very wishful to make the acquaintance of Uraca, and also, if it can

be managed, of her family likewise. They ask as many of us to accompany her as can make up their minds to do so. I presume he means that his parents' house will not be like this one, and that he is modest about pressing the invitations." Here the squire put on one of his droll looks again, but nobody noticed very much. "It is plain that they can make shift to accommodate a pretty fair party for a short time, and we must settle who are to go. Of course you and I, my dear, must go with the child; but as for the sisters and brothers, they must please themselves. Still, I think it would be a kind and friendly thing for some of us to go for a few days. They intend to keep Uraca over Christmas, it seems, but the rest of us can leave when we have made the acquaintance of the old people."

Edna and Violet exchanged amused glances.

"I don't think we will go, thank you, papa dear," they answered. "We should only be a bore to everybody. You see we could not do without our bedroom fires and hot baths, and it would be a fearful nuisance not to have Mary to do our hair, and wait on us. One can't expect to have all one has at home in a

house like that. I think we will stay at home, please. And I 'm quite sure the boys won't care to go. At least, Gerald won't. I don't feel quite so sure of Teddy. He and Uraca are rather chums."

Anna was debating with herself what to say. She had a strong curiosity to see what sort of a home and surroundings Ratcliff possessed, and she felt that she might have the satisfaction of being kindly patronising to the poverty-stricken young people if they began to do anything in the way of setting their own house in order. Anna was by no means all bad. She had a large fund of liberality and good nature, also she was aware that she had behaved ungenerously and rather meanly, and was not averse to the thought of making amends by some acts of practical liberality.

Her irritation had had time to abate. She had got over her vexation and sore feeling. She had quite made up her mind that she might do much better for herself even now than if she had married Ratcliff, and she had already resolved that next spring she would herself be at the expense of a house in London for the season, and see if by doing things on a

handsome scale, and by getting introductions to the best society, she and her sisters could not succeed in making good, if not actually brilliant, matches, as it seemed impossible to do in these out-of-the-way parts.

So altogether she was in a better frame of mind, and now looked up to say pleasantly enough—

"Well, I think if Edna and Violet remain at home, that I must go to represent the sisters. Mr Ratcliff and I were always rather friends. I have no objection at all to making the acquaintance of his parents if they are good enough to wish it. I think I can dispense with the lady's-maid and all the luxuries so dear to Edna and Violet. It will not be for very long, and"—

"You will have to do without anything but bread and cheese and water when you go to stay with Uraca," laughed the squire, pinching the cheek of his youngest daughter. "But I am glad you are going, Anna; it is more gracious for some of you to accept the invitation. I will see how Ted feels about it, and write the answer. We are asked to go the early part of next week. I suppose that will do as well as any other time."

"It seems funny that papa and mamma seem so ready to go and stay away from home in mid-winter," remarked Edna, when her parents had left the room together. "Generally mamma dislikes it so very much, and to go into a poor and poky little house, with nothing like the comfort she always has at home—I can't quite understand it. I suppose it is not very unusual for that sort of thing to happen when a daughter gets engaged, but really I do not think I ever heard of such a wholesale invitation before."

Violet slightly shrugged her shoulders.

"I don't know much about what is usual, we never had an engagement in the family before; but I do call it rather odd. Of course, rich people, with fine houses and plenty of servants and horses, and all the rest of it, are ready enough to give hospitable invitations, and invite large parties. But when there is nothing of that sort it looks rather queer, I think. It would not surprise me in the least if the whole thing came to nothing. If papa finds things very odd, he will very likely try and put his veto on it."

"Papa is so queer about it," said Edna.

"He is always talking about Uraca's cottage and poverty; but he laughs all the time, and makes a joke of it. I don't think it is any joke at all. I think he ought to know better."

"Papa always was rather odd," said Violet, yawning, and there the subject dropped.

Uraca was a good deal surprised by the number of "linings" fitted on to her slim figure during the next few days. It seemed as though she were to be rigged out in innumerable new dresses, very unnecessary, she thought, for a visit to a rather poor home. But her mother answered her remonstrance with a slightly heightened colour.

"Oh, my love, you may just as well have your trousseau well forward, and some of your new dresses can be taken down with us when we go. I should like you to look nice, and Anna always dresses so very well that it would hardly do for you to go about in your home frocks that give you a school-girl air. They will come in for the trousseau afterwards, and nothing will be wasted. One must do our kind friends the compliment of making you look nice. No doubt they will want to introduce you to their little circle too."

Uraca said no more, and troubled her head no further about the matter. She did not see the dresses, except the pretty tweed travelling suit she was to wear on the journey. The rest were all in a condition that gave her no idea of their texture or make. She did not even know that all were made in London, and sent direct from there.

When she saw her modest luggage in the hall ready for starting, she was quite content, and thought no more of the matter, her head being full of the approaching meeting with her lover.

CHAPTER XII.

DUCKLING OR SWAN?

"YOU are prepared for a very humble home, my dear?" asked the squire, as the train slackened speed before the station at which his party was to alight. "Your heart does not fail you at the last, I hope?"

Uraca's bright smile was sufficient answer. She was looking wonderfully pretty, the father thought, in her well-made, well-fitting suit of tan, trimmed with fluffy brown fur, a little cap to match crowning her dark curly hair, her eyes as bright as stars, and a rich damask bloom in her cheeks. The features might be irregular and nondescript, there might be many faults that an artist could point out in the dark little face, but as the father watched the quick play of expression, and saw the sweet curves of the sensitive mouth, as "the

child" gazed eagerly out to see if her lover were waiting for her on the platform, he rather marvelled within himself that she had ever been called the plain one of the family, and did not think that Ratcliff had chosen amiss in picking her out of the four daughters in the well-stocked quiver.

"There he is!" cried Uraca eagerly, and the next moment Ratcliff was at the carriage door.

He too looked very well, the Underwood party thought. Teddy's masculine eye observed at once that the young man's clothes were remarkably well made. He appeared to have come on horseback, for he wore riding boots, and carried a hunting crop in his hand. Uraca only saw his face, her eyes desired to travel no farther. He pressed her hand once, and then turned to welcome the rest.

A man-servant in livery was standing by, who instinctively touched his hat. He possessed himself of all the travellers' small impedimenta, and Anna looked at him with surprise. Uraca was too much engrossed in her own happiness even to notice.

As in a dream, Anna followed her party from the station. Her parents were taking everything as a matter of course. How Uraca felt she did not know. The officials at the station were politely officious in seeing to the luggage, and outside the station was a very large and roomy landau drawn by a pair of remarkably fine horses. Two good-looking saddle-horses were being led up and down by a groom.

"I thought you would like to ride with me, as the carriage will be full," said Ratcliff to Teddy; and the eyes of the latter were round with amazement as he eagerly accepted one of the best mounts it had ever been his lot to meet. The squire with his wife and daughters were accommodated in the carriage. Ratcliff sprang upon his own horse, and the cavalcade started in style, leaving the luggage to take care of itself, and follow in the cart sent for the purpose.

All this time Uraca had not spoken. She had no thoughts for anything but Ratcliff. Now, however, she began to let her mind have play, and Anna's astonished question was but the echo of her own—

"What in the name of wonder does it all mean?"

Then the squire leaned back in the carriage and laughed till the tears came. He had been bottling up his amusement all this time, and now he gave it full play.

"It means," he said at last, "that our little ugly duckling is going to follow in the footsteps of her nursery prototype and turn into a very fine kind of bird. My dear little daughter, let me prepare you for the surprise awaiting you. We are now bound for Fountaine Hall, the property of Sir Hugh and Lady Fountaine, the parents of your Ratcliff, who is their only son, and heir to a baronetcy and an immense fortune. He is so rich that he was always afraid of being accepted for his money, and so he played the little game of poverty, to see if he could win the heart of a woman who would love him for his own sake, believing he had little but love to give in return. You best know how far he has succeeded. For himself he is satisfied; though he begged, when he was telling the whole story to me, on asking for your hand, to let the mystery go on a little longer,

as he wanted the surprise to come upon you when it was quite too late for any hesitation or drawing back. His parents are delighted with the whole story, and eager to welcome as a daughter the girl who was wise enough to love their boy for his own sake, not knowing in the least his true position. For my part, I have no doubt but what my little girl will fill her place as well as any other lady in the land, and wealth will be all the more rightly and wisely bestowed because she was ready for a life of poverty."

Uraca's face was full of astonishment and bewildered interest. She could hardly take it all in yet—hardly knew whether to be glad or sorry, it was too strange, too wonderful, too incomprehensible. But perhaps she heard the news at a good moment, for her thoughts were so engrossed with Ratcliff that she really could think of nothing else.

As for Anna, she heard the words in silence, and a struggle went on within her. For a moment a sense of fierce unreasoning jealousy blazed up within her; but her better angel came to her aid, and in a moment she had conquered the unworthy feeling.

"I will not be mean and selfish," she said to herself. "I have enough and to spare myself. I ought to be glad, and I will be glad at Uraca's good fortune;" then she bent forward and kissed her sister, saying, with a really happy laugh—

"Well, dear, I am sure I am very glad, and I wish you every happiness. I always did feel sorry that you were going to a life of pinching and poverty. Nobody can congratulate you more heartily than I do on your happy change of fortune."

"Oh, Anna, how kind you are!" cried Uraca, startled and very grateful; but at this moment the carriage turned in at the gates of a stately park, and through the long vistas of leafless trees they began to catch glimpses of the fine old Tudor house which was to be Uraca's future home.

Ratcliff was at the carriage door to help her to alight, and as he saw by her face that she knew all, he bent over her, smiling tenderly as he said—

"You do not mind, do you, my Cara? You know you said you would gladly share

anything with me. Have I done wrong to take you at your word, and to bring you unprepared to this?"

That way of putting it seemed to take the slight oppression from Uraca's spirit.

Her sunny smile shone out again, and she placed her hand trustingly in that of her lover.

"I meant what I said then," she answered simply, "though I had never thought of anything like this. If you wish me to share it all with you, I will. I do not know if I am really fit; but you have chosen me. I cannot take back my word now. It must be for you to decide."

"Then I will take you to my mother," he said, and no answer beyond that seemed needed.

The squire and his wife and daughter were already being ushered through the fine baronial hall into the beautiful reception-room in which the master and mistress of the house were awaiting them. Ratcliff closely followed with Uraca, and he saw how eagerly the gaze of his parents fastened upon the two sisters

as they shook hands cordially with the parents, and welcomed them warmly to their house.

"And which is my future daughter?" asked Lady Fountaine, with a happy little quiver in her voice as she turned to the two girls.

Anna drew slightly back with a graceful dignity, whilst Ratcliff led the younger sister forward, and placed her in his mother's arms.

"Here she is, mother," said he in the very low voice that with him was indicative of stress of feeling. "I do not think, when you come to know her, that you will think my Cara does discredit to my powers of discrimination, which you tell me I have inherited from you."

The embrace Uraca received was full of such tenderness as won her warm heart at once. When she was able more fully to look at Lady Fountaine, she was certain from that moment forward that she would find a second mother in one who would bear for her the not too attractive title of "mother-in-law." She was a small woman—Ratcliff had taken

after her in spareness of figure—but she was graceful and gentle in manner, carrying the dignity of her position with unmistakable ease, but by nature retiring, reserved, almost timid. This last quality had been long outgrown, and no one would trace in Lady Fountaine's manner anything but perfect self-possession and gracious kindliness. Her face retained much of its youthful bloom, although the hair was silver and crowned with a picturesque cap of costly lace, such as can scarcely be bought in these days. Sir Hugh was a tall, fine-looking man, like most of the Fountaines. Ratcliff was a deflection from the ordinary type of those who bore his name, but somehow his parents had never regretted the new line he had struck out for himself. Other people were fond of saying what a pity it was the young man was so unlike his father, but the parents themselves held fondly to their opinion that Ratcliff could not be improved upon at any price.

Lady Fountaine stole several glances at Uraca, as the party sat sipping their tea out of dainty old china, and when the sound of

voices around her was loud enough to admit of confidential conversation, she turned to the girl with the prettiest little air of confidential inquiry, and said—

"My dear, are you quite sure that you are the right sister? My boy told me he had received special instructions to warn me to expect an ugly duckling."

Uraca's sweet, spontaneous laugh rang out at this. The delicately-turned compliment could not but please her.

"If you could see the others—the sisters at home—you would understand," she answered, with frank candour. "You can see how handsome Anna is, and the other two are lovely. I am very glad if I do not seem ugly to you. Perhaps I am one of the kind that gets better-looking by growing older, and I feel a great deal older than I did a few months ago. But I have always been the ugly duckling at home, and I am sure that I have deserved the name."

"Perhaps I have rather odd tastes on such points," said Lady Fountaine, with a smile; "for I believe my son is thought plain by

most people, but I never can think him so myself;" and the mother's eyes rested upon the face of her son—that face which so much lacked colour and regular beauty, yet notwithstanding this, to those who knew it well, possessed a charm far deeper than any of mere form and colour, the charm of exceeding power, exceeding patience, self-control and true manliness, together with a capacity for love that might well make the happiness of any woman who looked to him for a love corresponding to her own. Uraca's eyes followed those of Lady Fountaine, and an answering light crept into them. Then they looked at each other and smiled.

"I think that you and I will understand each other, my dear," she said; and Uraca thought so too, whilst the last little bit of oppression and strangeness vanished for ever as those words were spoken. From that moment forward Uraca felt at home in that house—felt that she was there by a sweet, unspoken right, and that her presence was welcome to those who held sway beneath that roof. Little by little she heard how

earnestly the parents had desired to see their son married, how they had longed to hear that his roving habits were at an end, and that he would settle down either with them at Fountaine, or upon one of the other estates, of which Sir Hugh had several, and gladden their hearts by a married happiness such as their own had been. They could not but believe that any woman would be glad to win a heart such as his; but he had had a rude awakening after his first wooing, and the time had seemed long before he could bring himself to believe that anyone could be brought to love him for his own sake. Now that this difficulty had been compassed, they could all afford to laugh over the past, and Uraca was not even jealous of the rival who had once hoped to reign at Fountaine, accepting the hand of the heir as the inevitable drop of bitter in the cup.

Those were happy days that glided by, when once the first strangeness had worn off. Never in her life had Uraca been so surrounded by luxury, and she smilingly wondered what Edna and Violet would think if

they could see the appointments of her room, the service rendered her as a matter of course, the harmonious working of the great house, and the evidences of wealth everywhere visible, though never ostentatiously displayed.

There was a saddle-horse at her disposal every day of the week, and her father would ride out with her and Ratcliff (or Teddy, if the squire were occupied) exploring the country, and enjoying the exhilaration of the exercise. The weather was mild and pleasant, and on some days there was the fascinating variety of a breathless scamper after the hounds. Gradually Uraca grew used to the thought that hers was to be a life of ease and luxury. It took her a little while to reconcile herself to the change. The prospect of the little cottage, and of the services she was daily to perform there for the man she loved, had had a great charm for her, and she did not altogether like the shattering of her airy fabric, But, as Ratcliff gravely reminded her, she had promised to take him "for better for worse," and that though it was very plain it was "for worse" in her opinion, she must try to make

the best of it, and grow reconciled by degrees. Uraca would laugh then, and remonstrate a little, and bye and by she ceased to think fondly of the ideal cottage, and threw herself into the interests of preparing the real home, which was to be a nice old-fashioned house, not too big or grand, about fifteen miles from Fountaine—a property that had come to Sir Hugh from a relative, and which he always hoped his son might learn to like, as the distance from house to house was nothing very formidable either by road or rail.

Anna stayed on with her sister when the parents went home, and there was always a fluctuating number of guests keeping the house lively, and giving more real privacy to the lovers, who found opportunities for many stolen walks in the gardens and shrubberies, or talks in the curtained recesses of the rooms, where gay chatter was drowning all other sound beside. Very soon Ratcliff began to urge on the wedding itself, and Uraca could allege no just cause or impediment why it should not be celebrated early in the ensuing year. Her own preparations were of the simplest kind, for

her mother was already doing all that was necessary in the trousseau line, and a visit to London before the girl went home would be all that would be required from her. They were both engaged now upon the preparation of the new house, and a very fascinating occupation it was. Finally the wedding was fixed for the middle of February, and as soon as the Christmas festivities at Fountaine were over, the two Underwood sisters went for a week to London to meet their mother, and then back home again, where Uraca found herself famous.

"So the prince did come—the prince did come!" cried the excited children, who were all at Staunton again for Christmas and the New Year. They had been very indignant at Uraca's defection at such a time, but it was partly made up to them by the conviction, forced by degrees upon their youthful minds, that Uraca was going to turn into a princess (as they had always declared she ought), and that possibly some good fortune might accrue to themselves through the reflected glory of her position. So they danced about her in

the greatest excitement, all asking questions in a breath.

It was rather a shock to them to find that Mannesty was not the prince after all, but "only the tutor." Still, when Tommy had heard a little of the talk amongst the elders, and understood how Ratcliff had played the part of "Prince in Disguise," they were a good deal more satisfied, and as it was promised that they should be witnesses of the ceremony, they made up their minds to think the best of the bridegroom, and to accept him as Cara's husband.

The old Manor House had never been so full as it was on the eve of the wedding, and visitors eager to witness the ceremony were billeted in many of the hospitable houses round. The "Two Salmon Heads" was crowded with guests, and such a bustle and tumult went on throughout the place as had never been known there before.

Edna and Violet were in their glory. They had got over the first sense of disappointment that this piece of good luck had not fallen in their way, and were making up for it by the

most absorbed interest in their own bridesmaids' dresses, in which they secretly thought they would quite eclipse the bride. Anna voted herself "too old" for the office. She had grown so much gentler and kinder, and altogether more lovable of late, that Uraca hardly knew her again.

It was on the night before the wedding that she was to learn the secret of the change in her sister's ways. Anna sought her, as she had done once before at that hour, and the recollection of that former interview was strong upon both sisters as they stood looking at each other that night. But Uraca was too happy for any cloud to trouble her, and Anna suddenly broke out with quite unexpected words—

"Uraca, can you forgive me for what I tried to do? I know it utterly failed,—with people like you and him it must have failed,—but, all the same, I tried to do it, tried to keep you apart; and I should like to hear you say that you forgive me before we part to-morrow."

"Indeed, indeed I do, if there is anything to forgive," answered Uraca earnestly. "Please let us never think of it again."

"I did not know what I was doing," pursued Anna, still speaking rapidly; "because I did not know what love was—I only knew what a vague feeling of attraction was, that I called by that name. But now I do know. Now I know what the real thing is like, and oh, I feel so horribly guilty at what I tried to do then! Uraca, I professed to tell you a secret that night, now I am going to tell you a real one. It is only a secret because everybody is so busy just now; but papa has time to think of nothing till you are gone; but I should like you to know. It is Harold Lethbridge. I daresay you have hardly thought of him or noticed him, but he was at Fountaine with us, and he has come down to see the wedding. He is with Mr Mannesty at the inn. He is not very young. He is five-and-thirty, and he has a small property in Leicestershire which he farms himself, and lives upon it most of the year. It sounds very humdrum, after your prospects, but we do not think so. We are very happy."

Uraca turned with brightening eyes, and warmly kissed her sister.

"I am so glad, dear Anna," she said. "It makes me very happy to know about it. I am very glad that you have told me before I go away. I shall think of you a great deal, and shall want to know what everybody says."

What everybody said at Staunton next day was that a prettier wedding than the one in the grey old church had certainly never been seen. It was quite a matter for astonishment to the good folks, who had known "little Miss Uraca" all her life, and had grown into the way of thinking her "a sweet-spoken young lady, to be sure, but with no manner of looks to take the eye like her sisters,"—it was a matter of no small astonishment to them to see what a wonderful change (as they phrased it) had passed over the young and unformed girl during the last few months, as they saw her in all her graceful bridal bravery, walking up the aisle upon her father's arm, a rich glow upon her cheek, a happy brightness in her eyes, as she looked straight before her to where her bridegroom stood awaiting her.

"Eh, but she's grown rare and bonnie," said the old village crones one to the other; and then they laid their heads together and agreed that they had always called her "the flower of the flock," and that, after all, it was "them as had the warmest hearts as grew to have the sweetest faces," and that "she deserved her good luck if anybody did—that she did and no mistake!"

It was a sight to see the faces of the bridal pair, as they came forth into the bright February sunshine at the close of the ceremony to receive the cheers and blessings of the people, and the huge nosegay of flowers from cottagers' windows that one of the little school children was put forward to present. It was with some little difficulty that Ratcliff made a way to the carriage for his bride, and as they drove off at last, with the kindly greetings of the people in their ears, he turned to press a kiss on her blooming cheek, and said—

"My darling, I think those good folks hardly knew you to-day. You have taken them all by storm. But though you said that

such a thing would never, never be, it has come true, after all, and my little 'ugly duckling' has turned into the swan, and is held on all sides to be 'the loveliest of all.'"

THE END.

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